

Chapter 12. Inclusion and exclusion of foreigners in the Westfjords of Iceland

Ólöf Júlíusdóttir

The research presented here took place in the northwestern part of Iceland, known as the Westfjords, in the autumn months of 2007 and 2008. The Westfjords are a large peninsula consisting of several villages of varying population sizes, where the prime industry has always been fishing. The total number of inhabitants there is around 7 000, while the whole population in Iceland is around 300 000 (Statistics Iceland, 2010). The Westfjords are still rather isolated from the rest of the country since traveling in these parts is often difficult, especially during the heavily snowed winters. The villages offer most basic services, that is: banks, post offices, schools, gas stations, etc. However, other services, such as hospitals and larger shopping centers, must be sought in a larger neighboring village.

A great number of foreigners live in the Westfjords. In the year 2007, individuals with foreign citizenship in the northern part of the Westfjords, where this research took place, were 406 but in 2008 they were 448 (Statistics Iceland, 2010). This number is around 9% of the population living in the northern part of Westfjords, and thereof 5% were of Polish citizenship. The other foreign citizens, ordered in decreasing number, are from the Philippines, Thailand, Estonia, Slovenia and Germany. It should be noted that some foreigners now hold the Icelandic citizenship. However, a few decades ago foreign workforce working in the fishing industry originally consisted of women from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa traveling the world and looking for temporary work (Skaptadóttir, 2003). Although there may be various reasons for people moving to different countries, what generally motivates people is the search for a source of income as jobs are scarce in their homeland.

A great number of Poles in the Westfjords work in the fishing industry, but also in the area of education, interpretation, and other public offices. There is a Catholic center in the area, where a Polish priest administers the service, and it also serves as a meeting place for the Polish people. Furthermore, there exists an Association of Poles, Polish food is sold at the gas station, and prices and other information is commonly available in Polish, for example at swimming halls and shops.

The research material for this study was mostly obtained by participant observation, interviewing individuals as well as small groups, both Icelanders and immigrants, many of them of Polish origin. Data collection was performed in three separate field studies taken in the Westfjords. The aim is not to generalize to bigger groups but to analyze the views of the participants and hence obtain an insight and an understanding of how they experience the world they live in (Taylor and Bogdan 1998, pp. 7-10). This work is a part of my Master's thesis undertaken at the University of Iceland under the supervision of Professor Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir.

In this study not only the integration of locals and foreigners and how they form a community is examined, but also the possibility of creating a society in which all inhabitants can coexist on equal terms despite their ethnic origin. To be able to do that it is important that all citizens participate in the community. Participation implies involvement in social activities and committees, among other things.

It is important to note that the public, politicians, and experts differ in their views on integration. Commonly it is regarded that people of different nationality should integrate with the society they choose to live in. However, today it is regarded that everyone must participate in the integration, including the locals. Here the process of integration is researched in light of the theory of inclusion and exclusion. This approach will draw a clearer picture of the evolution of a multicultural society in the Westfjords.

Social exclusion or inclusion is a concept used to characterize contemporary forms of social disadvantage or advantage. Exclusion usually implies being denied rights, opportunities and resources (Gudmundsson 2008, p. 185). This research examines the participation and integration, as viewed by the local Icelanders and foreigners, in the Westfjords.

Social gap: The importance of learning the language

Many of the participants in this study stated that Icelanders and foreigners lived completely separate lives, despite the smallness of the villages. A middle-aged Icelandic described the social gap between Icelanders and foreigners in the following way: “foreigners keep to themselves and we keep to ourselves”. Further inquiries revealed that many individuals and families came to the country to work temporarily and then move back home. This was also the viewpoint of foreigners who started learning the language late, their aim was never to settle in Iceland. They did not try to get to know Icelanders since they were leaving soon anyway. The reality is, nevertheless, different. Although some remain only for a short period, others have extended their stay and even brought over extended family members.

Another reason for this social gap was the language barrier. Those that did not speak Icelandic were more likely to become more isolated and did not participate in the community. Instead they relied on other foreigners that had lived for a longer period of time in Iceland and have command of the language. Many had made the effort of learning Icelandic in the evenings, after a long workday, which resulted in greater job opportunities and increased communication with others. Some had no intentions of taking Icelandic classes, even though they had lived in Iceland for a long time. Not learning the language can put added strain on the family life. One father of a Polish family let the wife and children translate for him. His coworkers were mainly his fellow countrymen and he, on the one hand, preferred their company or that of other family members living in Iceland. He claimed that the lack of language skills did not trouble him. On the other hand, his wife who acted as his interpreter in the interview did not agree. She felt her life would be easier if he could take part in formal communication, such as with schools, banks and other public institutions. She was angry over this, “Why do I only speak Icelandic and not you?” Her knowledge of the language made her aware of what was going on in the community and what services were available, while her husband had little or no knowledge of these things.

It was reiterated in many of the interviews, among both Icelanders and foreigners, that in order to settle and partake in the community one needs to speak the language. Even though language instruction was offered

by the community outside working hours, the foreigners would have preferred learning the language during working hours and getting paid for it, as their working hours were long already. However, it is generally feared that a system which pays for language learning would be abused, as has happened in some cases. In this case, foreigners were paid to attend classes but did not turn up for them. For this reason some companies offered language courses one hour before their work time was over, but the class was two hours long. However, it became apparent that having a language course after a long workday was not fruitful.

Although language is a key for integration, it is not a guarantee that foreigners will participate and integrate with the community. Other factors are also necessary, for example whether or not they intend to stay for a longer period of time, the social network, family ties, and friends.

When integration is discussed it is important that individuals are aware that it is not only expected that foreigners adapt to the community, but also that the locals adapt to the new situation. It appears that it is impossible to integrate without participation and in order to participate one must learn the language. In the case of itinerant workers, it was generally agreed that they should not be obligated to learn the language. Nevertheless, the interviewees remarked that those that originally came for temporary work often ended up staying longer than planned and, therefore, it is necessary that all foreigners make the effort to learn the language.

Social event: Midwinter Festival¹

“Foreigners just want to be by themselves”, was a quote from one person spoken to when asked why foreigners did not take a more active part in the village life. The view that foreigners simply did not want to mix with the locals commonly surfaced during this research, mainly from the local Icelanders. Only a small group of foreigners are said to attend the Icelandic midwinter festival (Þorrablót) or other functions, and it’s rare to see them participate in the choir or other social events. The midwinter festival is one of the biggest yearly events in the villages. They can

¹ Þorrablót is a winter festival celebrated during the month of Þorri, which according to the Old Icelandic calendar begins in late January. At that time, Icelanders hold communal meetings during which traditional dishes are served, such as: hákarl (shark meat), svið (smoked head of mutton), lifrarpylsa (a sausage made from mutton liver).

be anything from an informal dinner with friends and family to large organized events with performances and other entertainment.

When attempting to partake in social events some foreigners maintain that they received an unfriendly welcome. A Polish couple attended a gathering, like midwinter festival, where Icelanders were the majority. The wife claimed it was obvious that their presence was not wanted and she would not force herself into a group when not welcome, she said “You see, I close myself off when I know I’m not welcome”. Others were not interested in partaking in such events; one of my informants remarked, “Icelanders might ask themselves whether it is compulsory to attend the midwinter festival?” One village tried to guarantee the participation of Polish people by having a Polish person participating in the organization of the festival and being their contact to other Poles. A foreigner described his experience of the winter festival as follows: “You come into this big gymnasium, look around, and ask yourself the big question: where should I sit? You start to wander about in the hall, and then someone calls you and asks you to sit with them. It is actually more fun to know someone that invites you to sit with them. I can imagine that it is difficult to know no one, to sit apart, that would be awful”.

The experience of this person is possibly different from many others, he knows many in the villages, speaks the language well, is well integrated and very sociable. This is not the case for all and as he remarks, it may be difficult for many to attend the midwinter festival and not be recognized. People may even feel rejected, like the couple that did not feel welcome at the festival.

The population size in the Westfjord is small. As with any small villages and towns they need the people’s participation in social events and issues. Undoubtedly, foreigners are included in social events, but they have the feeling of being excluded, as in the case of the midwinter festival. If they were to be fully included, I would assume the structure of the festival and attitude of the locals would have to change in some way.

From the interviews it was clear that Icelanders expected foreigners to take a more active role in the social and cultural events in the villages and the surrounding area. The view of some of the foreigners was that they were not going to settle and so could not be bothered to participate; others said that they devoted all spare time after work to being with their family. Another common remark from foreigners was that they did not

enjoy some events, such as the midwinter festival, where they did not understand what was going on, they felt unwelcome and the music was undesirable. They were unwilling to pay for such entertainment.

Multicultural event

Foreigners are most active as participants in events that centre on them in one way or the other, or on their origin. An example of this is their participation in Roots (Rætur), an association for people interested in cultural diversity. The association was founded in the year 2000, and organizes cultural events where foreigners of various origins introduce their culture to the locals, for example by preparing traditional food from their homeland. This is not a regular event, but is organized within regular intervals by both Icelanders and foreigners. The interviewees were all pleased with the efforts made by Roots and found the cultural festival a welcome addition in order to present the cultural diversity in the Westfjords. One person remarked that the Asian women were extremely diligent in introducing their traditional food culture at these events and created a positive image of them within the local community with their effort. Through these cultural events Icelanders have the opportunity to learn more about the diverse groups living within their villages. The festivals are also a gathering where foreigners and Icelanders can interact and so make up for their lack of communication. Although cultural events are favorable, it does not necessarily imply that they will increase the interaction between people of different origin, but rather they are a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about other cultural worlds. Events of this type are known throughout the world and are often highly regarded. Scholars have, on the other hand, criticized multicultural events and multicultural policies for not taking into account the different social structure of the various cultural groups, instead these events encourage symbolic identity (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1992, p. 368). Culture is not something that lies in parallel or is confined by country borders, but is consistently being formed and overlapped, within and across borders. We are, therefore, not only and exclusively participants in one confined culture, but part of many simultaneously (Skaptadottir 1997, pp. 280-281). Culture is not a property of the individual but something that they mould and remould, as discussed by Gerd Baumann (1999). In this

light, one may consider whether these cultural events are more likely to highlight what separates the individuals in the villages, as opposed to what they have in common.

A form of exclusion

It is interesting to speculate why there is such an emphasis on foreigners to partake in social events, but less so when it comes to committees or administration positions where important decisions are taken for the villages. An Icelandic male said: "... I'm quite active in social matters but have never seen a foreigner involved in social matters I have been involved in". He continues by saying: "...I have never seen a foreigner in any committee or management position in any of the jobs that I've undertaken". These remarks prompt further questions about multicultural societies, inclusion and exclusion. Why are Icelanders of the opinion that it is important for foreigners to partake in local cultural and social events, but don't mention the need for them to be visible when it comes to important decisions for the villages? It is obvious that foreigners are included in what Grillo (2007) calls cultural integration, where their presence is required for events where tradition plays an important role, such as the midwinter festival. The research shows that exclusion in the Westfjords seems to be more likely to occur with regard to responsible positions, such as management and committees, and where a good knowledge of the Icelandic language is required. This is community exclusion, according to Grillo (2007). Nevertheless, the situation is more complicated than that: foreigners have social access, such as the right to work and pay taxes, the exclusion is not entirely of a social nature. The condition for inclusion in the Westfjords is clearly the knowledge of the Icelandic language, as this simplifies all communication with people and institutions within the community and enhances further job prospects. It is also a requirement made by many employers. A woman in her fifties who had been living for more than ten years in the Westfjords said: "It is difficult to have a university degree and end up working in the fishing industry, just because one does not speak the language". This is the situation for some foreigners working in Iceland. Their education is not recognized and the only jobs they are offered are those not requiring language skills, such as manual labour. Other interesting issues that

were brought up in conversations with both Icelanders and foreigners is the envy towards those who are successful and get their education recognized, or have other language skills, such as English, that help them to communicate with other members of the society and translate for those who only speak their language of origin. It would be interesting to have a further look at this subject, which undoubtedly concerns inclusion and exclusion in the social context of the villages.

Conclusions

The Westfjords is a small community, and as with any small community, it needs the people's participation in social events and issues. Icelanders seem to have more opportunity to participate, compared to the immigrants living in the Westfjords. This is a matter of inclusion and exclusion in the process of integration; the foreigners are wanted in social happenings although many of them have the feeling of being unwelcome. The research shows that it is less likely that foreigners or immigrants are included in social issues where responsibility is required. It remains unclear why this is the case and there may be a number of reasons. It may be due to their lack of language competence or interest, as they may not intend to stay long. Alternatively, their social network within the villages may be weak and so make them unlikely to be appointed. On the other hand, they may simply be excluded from policy making decisions.

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