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Author(s): Lahti, Malgorzata; Valo, Maarit

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The Development of Intercultural Relationships at Work: Polish Migrant Workers in Finland

Malgorzata Lahti and Maarit Valo

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract
This article offers an interpersonal communication perspective on relational processes in a workplace affected by the international flow of labor migration. We investigate how temporary migrant workers and their foreign colleagues perceive developing interpersonal relationships with each other through an analysis of in-depth interviews with employees of a Finnish recruitment agency and Polish metal workers it has recruited. The recruitment agents talk about their relationships with the recruited Polish workers; the Polish workers also describe their relationships with their Finnish colleagues at the customer company. The context under investigation emerges as rich in relational processes. The development of intercultural workplace relationships is analyzed in terms of motives for and against engaging in relational growth, as well as behaviors enacted to develop or not develop relationships.

Keywords: intercultural relational development, intercultural workplace relationships, interpersonal workplace relationships, migrants in Finland, Polish migrant workers, relational development motives, relational behaviors

Introduction
The contemporary workplace is becoming increasingly characterized by nonstandard forms of employment (Ballard and Gossett 2007), which may affect the ways organizational members initiate and develop interpersonal relationships. One such nontraditional work arrangement is that of a foreign migrant worker, its occurrence fuelled by the growing labor shortage in low-status employment sectors experienced by Western states (Castles 2002). In the European context, work-related migration increased considerably when mobility and employment restrictions were lifted for citizens of several East European states upon the EU expansion in 2004 and 2007 (Demireva 2011).

Although hiring foreign migrants to do the so-called '3D (dirty, dangerous and dull) jobs' (Cook, Dwyer and Waite 2011) in industry, construction, low-skilled services or care-giving has become common practice, surprisingly little is known about these people's interpersonal relationships at work. Research into different forms of employment that overlap with that of foreign temporary labor either questions whether migrants form interpersonal workplace relationships at all or presents these ties as dysfunctional. In his discussion on temporary agency work, Tanskanen (2007) comments that the trend objectifies persons by capitalizing on their productivity. The temporary character of employment encourages the use of short-term value communicative strategies, such as engaging in conflict and abusing the other (Ballard and Gossett 2007). Migrants may themselves have few interpersonal interests vested in their foreign workplace since they perceive their stay as temporary (Demireva 2011). The image suggests someone who works hard in the host country but pretends to be living their interpersonal life in their home country, maintaining constant contact with family and

friends. Indeed, the growing body of literature on communication practices of migrant workers (e.g. Uy-Tioco 2007) is mostly preoccupied with migrants' use of communication technologies to stay in touch with their intimates and stand up against their subjection in the country of employment.

We believe that the theme of relationship building in a workplace with temporary foreign employees warrants a scientific inquiry. In this article, we want to fill the apparent research gap by offering an interpersonal communication perspective on relational processes in a workplace affected by the international flow of labor migration. Our goal is to investigate how temporary migrant workers and the persons they work with in their foreign workplace perceive developing interpersonal relationships with each other.

Theoretical background

Relational development

We adopt Sigman's (1995) definition of an interpersonal relationship as an ongoing behavioral process enacted through communication. Interpersonal relationships involve repeated interaction (Sias et al. 2002) and are always in the state of becoming (Step and Finucane 2002).

Questions of how and why interpersonal relationships change over time have preoccupied researchers since the 1970s (Mongeau and Miller Henningsen 2008). Several scholars have attempted to describe and explain how relationships are formed, developed, maintained and dissolved (e.g. Altman and Taylor 1973; Knapp and Vangelisti 2005). Characteristic of this line of research is the idea that communication is critical for relational development. Not only are relationships constituted in communication but also features and development of relationships are manifested in interpersonal communication between the partners (e.g. Burgoon and Hale 1984).

Insights into the process of relational growth can be found in one of the pioneering relationship development theories, Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration. The major premise of the theory is that changes in interpersonal communication are inherent in relational development. Social penetration denotes an array of interpersonal behaviors (verbal, nonverbal, and environmentally oriented behaviors) that take place in a developing relationship. A behavior pivotal to the process is that of self-disclosure, or revealing of information about oneself. Self-disclosure can be gauged along the dimension of the amount of exchanged information (breadth) and the intimacy level of information exchange (depth). With gradual, systematic and reciprocal self-disclosure between the partners, the relationship progresses towards greater intimacy. Although the theory renders relational development as linear, the authors acknowledge that '[t]he process ebbs and flows, does not follow a linear course, cycles and recycles through levels of exchange' (Altman and Taylor 1973, pp. 135-136).

Relational growth is influenced by various factors such as personality characteristics, the environmental context or the perceived relational rewards and costs (Taylor and Altman 1975). Borrowing on social exchange theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978) it is predicted that the calculated ratio between relational rewards and costs points to how successful the interaction has been in fulfilling people's needs, and what course relational maintenance will take in the future.

From colleagues to friends

Workplace relationships are interpersonal relationships that individuals engage in when doing their job, such as peer co-worker, subordinate-supervisor or customer-client relationships (Sias 2009). These relationships are usually imposed; we cannot choose our supervisor, nor can we avoid interactions with a co-worker that we dislike. However, workplace relationships may evolve, as they often do, into forms that go beyond the minimum required to complete organizational tasks.

Kram and Isabella (1985) proposed a typology of peer workplace relationships that includes three primary relationship stages: information, collegial and special. Information relationships entail sharing organization- and work-related information while providing little emotional support, and are characterized by low levels of self-disclosure and trust. Persons in a collegial relationship enjoy moderate levels of trust and self-disclosure. They exchange not only work-related information, but also job-related feedback, and support each other on work and family issues. They are more likely to receive confirmation and validation of self-worth. The special relationship denotes friendship, with profound self-disclosure and self-expression. The partners provide each other with personal feedback, self-affirmation and a sense of an emotional connection. Special and collegial peers are more likely to use affinity-seeking strategies, i.e. the use of communication to bring about liking and the creation of positive feelings (Gordon and Hartman 2009).

The workplace context, rather than being a ‘container’ for friendships, plays a crucial role in the developmental process (Sias and Cahill 1998). Acquaintances develop into friendships due to the persons working side by side and sharing tasks. Friendships become close usually because of personal or work-related problems, but the development is also supported by extra organizational socializing and perceptions of similarity.

Methodology

Research context

We want to gain insights into the dynamics of relational development in the workplace that has become culturally diverse due to the arrival of foreign migrant workers. The article reports on the findings of interviews with employees of a Finnish recruitment agency and Polish workers recruited by that agency.

One needs social capital to migrate abroad safely and cheaply (Castles 2002). Migrants often rely on connections with their fellow nationals in the target country who have already established how to solve bureaucratic problems, find work and accommodation (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008). The recruitment agency business has tapped into the needs of persons without such networks, becoming a prospering form of the ‘migration industry’ (Castles 2007).

When the data for this study were gathered in 2007, the Finnish recruitment agency had just begun hiring steel and building industry professionals from new EU-member countries in Eastern Europe, including Poland. Foreign workers were employed by the agency and then ‘rented out’ to Finnish customer organizations. The responsibilities of the agency staff were not limited to matching the person with the job. Each recruitment agent had a number of his or her ‘own’ workers that they were regularly in touch with both face-to-face and over the phone and that they would provide assistance to on work-, accommodation-, health-, and travel-related matters. Needless to

say, the relationship between the agent and the foreign migrant was a prominent workplace relationship.

The recruits' workplace interactions were not limited to those with the agent. Every day at work in the customer organization they would meet their Finnish peer co-workers and supervisors. While guest workers tend to end up performing jobs alongside other migrants or ethnic minority members (Cook et al. 2011), our respondents entered workplaces that were predominantly Finnish. They were employed in metal companies located in small towns in Northern Ostrobothnia, a region sparsely populated and viewed as a stronghold of mainstream Finnish culture. In many cases, the Polish recruits were the first foreign employees in the given workplace, if not the first foreigners for their Finnish colleagues to meet.

Respondents and data collection

The data were originally gathered by the first author for another research project that focused on informal intercultural learning in the workplace. In that study (2007), it emerged that informal intercultural learning was perceived as learning about one's culturally different colleagues with the goal of developing relationships with them. It was clearly worthwhile to revisit the data from a relational development angle.

The first author interviewed people involved in intercultural encounters in the workplace. 14 potential respondents were contacted, 9 of which agreed to participate. The respondent group included 4 male recruited Polish workers and 5 employees of the recruitment agency (4 females and 1 male; 4 Finns and a Polish immigrant who had been living in Finland for 3 years). The participants were 26 - 47 years old. Their educational backgrounds varied from vocational training to a university degree, and their professions - from managing director and recruitment consultant, through interpreter, to computer numerical control machine programmer and operator, and welder. While the recruitment agents and the younger contracted workers knew English, the older contracted workers did not speak any foreign language. The recruited workers interviewed had been living in Finland for 3 to 6 months. The length of their job contract was not specified. They signed an open contract with the agency that guaranteed them work for as long as there was demand. Job insecurity and prospects of having to move between different Finnish metal companies were an inherent part of their working experience.

The interviews were qualitative and could be described after Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 170) as 'events in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences.' The interviews were based on a set of themes that included: expectations about interactions at work, interpersonal experiences at work and interest in one's co-workers. The first interview was conducted face-to-face, while the others over the phone or Skype, and they were all recorded. The Finnish respondents were interviewed in Finnish, and the Polish respondents in Polish. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, with the overall data comprising 11 hours of recording.

Research framework

We approach the phenomenon of relational development through the perceptions of our respondents. People's understandings of their actions may differ from what they actually do. This issue is reflected in the problematic matter of locating an interpersonal

relationship itself. Is the relationship situated between the persons, or is it in their individual perceptions of their relationship? According to Baxter and Bullis (1986), although a relationship is an entity jointly constructed by the partners, each partner perceives the construction process in his or her own unique way. Working within the interpretive paradigm, we believe that studying people's interpretations of their experiences contributes to building scientific understanding because people's actions are constituted through the meanings that they give to them (Schwandt 2000).

We aim at developing an interpretation of the participants' interpretations of intercultural relational dynamics at work. In doing this, we also lean on social constructionism by acknowledging that people's subjective understandings are shaped in interactions with others, and through historical and cultural norms (Creswell 2009). The research process is constructed in the exchange between the researcher and the participant, and further shaped by the researcher's own values and dispositions (Constantino 2008).

Data analysis and interpretation

The research method in this study was qualitative content analysis. The interview transcripts were read several times to identify sections where the respondents talk about issues related to intercultural workplace relationships – reasons, explanations, functions, expectations, actions, behaviors, processes, etc. Because workplace relationships in their basic form are imposed on the organizational members, we employed Kram and Isabella's (1985) typology of workplace relationships and searched for descriptions that pointed to relational development beyond the information level.

The fragments of data were coded to generate lowest level concepts, and then linkages (commonalities, differences, patterns and structures) between the concepts were identified (Seidel and Kelle 1995). The coding process was a mixture of data reduction and complication in that it was employed to break the data up into manageable chunks as well as to interrogate, expand and theorize about the data (Seidel and Kelle 1995).

While our ideas arose from the data, we did not apply a purely grounded theory approach; our theorizing was abductive or theory bound (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2006). We focused on individuals' perceptions of their intercultural relational experiences at work. The respondents talked a lot about different reasons or explanations related to developing or not developing intercultural relationships at work. They also gave numerous examples of their relational activities. We therefore chose to look at the data in terms of motives for and against engaging in relational development, and behaviors enacted to develop or not develop relationships. The different motives and behaviors emerging from the data were then reflected against Kram and Isabella's (1985) typology of workplace relationships and Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory.

Findings

The recruitment agents discuss their relationships with the recruited Polish workers. The Polish workers describe their relationships with the recruitment agents, as well as with their co-workers and supervisors at the customer company.

The motives for and against developing workplace relationships are not experienced in isolation. The respondents manage several, often conflicting motives related to developing intercultural ties. Similarly, individuals enact a range of behaviors

that may support but also contradict one another.

The findings are grouped into larger themes that unite, organize and explain them: *managing the lack of a common language*, *interpersonal network imbalance*, *expectations of good workplace relationships*, and *understanding the role of culture in intercultural relational development*. When presenting the findings, we try to show the connections between the different motives and relational behaviors.

English translations of interview excerpts presented in the text were provided by the first author.

Managing the lack of a common language

While the agency provides interpreting services to its foreign employees in administrative matters, the task of managing the language barrier in everyday informal interactions is left up to the workers themselves. Within this theme, the following motives emerged: *avoiding difficult and unnecessary interactions*, *finding other ways of relating to each other*, and *learning a foreign language*.

The respondents perceive self-disclosure as pivotal to relational development. Not sharing a common language to exchange personal information in is identified as the greatest obstacle in developing intercultural relationships at work. These contracted Polish workers who do not speak any English report *avoiding difficult and unnecessary interactions* with their Finnish colleagues. Potential interactions are seen as a source of stress and embarrassment. A Polish respondent describes how imitates his Finnish colleagues so as not to be conspicuous and avoid being approached by anyone. The inability to engage in more abstract exchanges is often met with frustration. This is how another Polish respondent explains why he has not developed a closer relationship with a Finnish colleague working beside him:

> Let's say I invited him for coffee, he came over and then what? At work you can… communicate, use sign language to find out about things, but otherwise use sign language to talk?

Those respondents who do speak English say that the range of topics they talk about with their foreign co-workers is still limited. These findings correspond with the communicative practice of *thin communication* identified by Tange and Lauring (2009) in their study of social interaction in a multilingual workplace that had adopted a common corporate language. Faced with the discomfort of having to communicate in a second language, employees limit their interactions to work-related issues and withdraw from informal exchanges.

People are, nevertheless, motivated to *find other ways of relating to each other*. Symbolic displays of liking and nonverbal communication are employed to convey affection, respect and emotional support. A Polish participant recounts how touched he felt when on the last day at work before Christmas holiday, the Finnish supervisor came to give the Polish employees Christmas greetings in broken Polish that he must have put a lot of effort into practicing. A Finnish recruitment agent marvels at how polite some Polish contracted workers are as 'they shake hands with their supervisor every day when they come to work and when they're leaving.' Such generous use of handshakes is hardly a Polish workplace custom; a more accurate interpretation would be that the men lack the words to communicate liking and respect to their supervisor, so they do it with nonverbal

communication. Facial expressions and gestures are also employed to give emotional support, as in this quote where a Polish man describes the stressful situation of having a difficult welding job examined by a controller:

> As soon as we'd passed the test, the Finnish colleague I had done the job with came over with a huge grin on his face showing me that everything was okay. […] It made me feel appreciated and uplifted.

This example also supports the notion that bonding between colleagues can be accelerated by experiencing organizational problems or going through difficult situations together (Sias and Cahill 1998).

Not being able to obtain information from their foreign co-workers themselves due to limited linguistic skills, the participants turn to their fellow nationals for help. Both the employees of the Finnish agency and the Polish guest workers report engaging in group reflection where they retell their intercultural experiences and together produce explanations for the others' behavior.

The Polish contracted workers have amassed quite a body of information about their Finnish colleagues through observation. The following excerpt is an account of one such 'ethnographic' project:

> We ventured out to see where they go [in their free time] – we're not able to ask them. We saw a line of people walking [cross-country skiing] on the frozen sea, on their way to Sweden? [laughs]. We followed them for a while, saw how they disappeared into the distance, and then we turned back.

The respondents also become involved in joint language learning projects. *Learning a foreign language* supports relational growth as it is an extra-organizational activity that the partners engage in together. Moreover, learning a shared language gradually enables the partners to self-disclose. The recruitment agents and migrant workers exchange Polish and Finnish language learning materials. A Polish respondent says that he and his Finnish colleague have established a fixed time during the workday when they learn some of each other's language. Some interviewees perceive being in an intercultural relationship as a means of improving their linguistic skills, which confirms the findings of intercultural friendship research (e.g. Lee 2006; Sias et al. 2008).

Interpersonal network imbalance

The employees of the recruitment agency and the Finnish metal workers are at home in Finland, embedded in their interpersonal support systems. The Polish recruits left all their relationships behind when they came to Finland. Most of their interpersonal interactions take place in the workplace as they work long hours, often six days a week. Within this theme, the following motives were found: *discounting the others' relational interest*, *structural obstacles*, *cultural cliques*, *living one's interpersonal life in the home country*, *keeping the other satisfied*, *earning the other's respect*, *validating the other* and *supporting one's adaptation to the new environment*.

Some recruitment agents say that they have been developing closer relationships with Polish migrants while others say they have not. Those who limit their contacts with the guest workers to taking care of organizational matters *discount the others' relational*

interest. They point out that the recruits are in Finland for economic opportunistic reasons, and not to socialize.

Another reason given for not getting involved with the recruited foreign workers is *structural obstacles* - the character of one's job as an intermediary with no leadership responsibility, lack of time and incompatible timetables when '[f]inding time to meet just to take care of their things can be demanding.'

Migrant workers may not feel inclined to develop closer ties with host culture members either, one reason for that being the formation of *cultural cliques.* There usually are a few Poles working at the same Finnish metal company; these people often share accommodation. They spend their free time together recreating the illusion of the home country and providing one another with all the comfort, assistance and self-validation that they need.

Another motive that holds some Polish respondents from developing interpersonal relationships in their Finnish workplace is that they *live their interpersonal life in the home country*. These people maintain frequent contact with their family and friends to ease the pain of separation, and limit their interactions in the new environment to the minimum, be that with their fellow nationals or Finnish co-workers. When asked for advice on how to adapt to life in Finland, a Polish respondent says: **'**Be active or else homesickness will hit you even harder. Go out for a walk or a swim, go to sauna, then time will run faster.' All the activities mentioned are done alone, and their purpose it to help pass the time till the next trip home.

When we, however, consider the ties with host culture members that guest workers may have, the relationship with the Finnish recruitment agent is likely to be a prominent one. The agency staff have, in fact, recognized that many foreign recruits rely on them interpersonally and feel abandoned if the relationship remains on the information level. *Keeping the other satisfied* emerges as a motive that prompts recruitment agents to engage in more frequent and informal interactions with foreign workers:

> When a foreign worker comes to Finland, we take care of his things here, and through this we develop a closer relationship with him. Of course, you need to ask Finnish recruits, too, about how they're doing and such, but with foreign workers you have to be in touch more just to keep them satisfied.

This motive is linked to yet another reason for developing closer relationships with migrant workers – *earning the other's respect*. The respect of contracted workers is gained by acknowledging their loneliness and demonstrating more personal interest in them: engaging in informal conversations where topics other than work are discussed, exhibiting increased concern for their psychological and physical wellbeing, giving them favors such as lifts or help in everyday matters. 'If you simply bring them to work in Finland and leave them on their own, they probably won't respect you either,' sums up a Finnish respondent.

Some recruitment agents feel a moral responsibility for upholding the self-esteem of the foreign workers, and it is the need to *validate the other* that encourages relational growth. A Finnish participant describes how through informal interactions with the Polish workers she helps them feel human: **'**I find it important to ask about their families and whether they've worked abroad before. I think they appreciate being treated like

human beings and not like machines.'

The Polish recruits believe that developing closer ties with their Finnish co-workers could *support their adaptation to the new environment*. They see the open communication, trust, intimacy, and a sense of inclusion associated with friendship as contributing to psychological comfort. 'If I knew the language, I would soon find a friendly soul, someone easy to talk to, someone who would want to talk to me. And then I'd be fine,' says an interviewed Pole. Potential friends are searched among the persons met at work, usually colleagues occupying neighboring workstations or the contracted worker's 'own' recruitment agent. Such ways of initiating and developing ties have been reported as asking for and offering help with work-related tasks, employing nonverbal communication to communicate liking, using affinity seeking strategies, engaging in small talk and joking.

Expectations of good workplace relationships

Perceptions of relational development are also related to the need to have good workplace relationships. According to our respondents, however, a good workplace relationship denotes different levels of collegiality to Poles and Finns. Within this theme, the following motives were found: *expecting to socialize at work*, *expecting workplace relationships to extend outside work*, *not expecting to socialize at work*, *separating one's working and private lives*, *seeing trust as located in an interpersonal relationship*, and *seeing trust as inherent in a workplace relationship*.

The contracted workers describe the interpersonal climate at their Finnish workplace as good. It appears, however, that they have developed collegial ties with only a few members of the Finnish staff and that they would *expect to socialize at work* more. The Poles talk about initiating interactions with the Finns working beside them. They use work-related issues as a pretext, and try to be around others, for example by following their Finnish colleagues for coffee breaks.

The Poles express surprise at the apparent lack of social interaction among the Finnish employees: 'They don't even chat with one another, you don't see them sitting around together talking.' It is concluded that the Finns do *not expect to socialize at work*. This observation is supported by a Finnish respondent reflecting on what he thinks characterizes Finnish working style: 'We don't talk much but do the job. […] And when a livelier more talkative person […] joins in, Finns are perplexed.'

Relationships initiated at work remain bound to the workplace. Participating in extra organizational activities with one's foreign colleagues is unusual. The Finns are perceived as quiet and private persons who *separate their working and private lives*. 'Our contacts are limited to the workplace, we don't meet after work. Every now and then you bump into someone downtown, he'll greet you and walk his way,' describes a Polish respondent disappointedly.

The Finnish respondents have noticed that the Poles put more effort into maintaining their ties with their co-workers, and that they *expect workplace relationships to extend outside work*. The recruitment agents have been subjected to various affinity seeking strategies themselves. The Poles invite the agents to their place and even prepare traditional national dishes for them. A Finnish interviewee talks with appreciation about Valentine's Day greetings and holiday postcards that Polish workers send her. Another Finnish respondent describes how, following her traffic accident, the Poles flooded her

with cards and text messages:

> They see these relationships as more personal. If you're on sick leave, they don't just look for another person who is filling in, but they're in touch with you all the time. I got lots of messages asking how I was doing and wishing me to get well. […] It brought us closer together.

The respondents agree that trust is the cornerstone of a good workplace relationship. However, understandings of where trust is located differ. The Polish interviewees *see trust as located in an interpersonal relationship*, and therefore earned through developing interpersonal closeness: 'To trust someone means to know someone well, and here at work we don't even know one another's names.' Due to a relative lack of relational closeness, the Polish respondents perceive the situation at work as lacking in mutual trust, which in turn creates anxiety.

The Finnish respondents *see trust as inherent in the workplace relationship*. The very fact that two persons are bound by a common organizational membership or a business relationship is enough for them to trust each other. From the point of view of building trust, developing interpersonal relationships is perceived as not necessary. The Finnish respondents complain that the recruited workers unfairly challenge their trustworthiness: 'They're suspicious of absolutely everything. You need to repeat things many times and support your words with documents, preferably adorned with official stamps.' Some of the Finnish respondents have realized that they can only earn the Poles' trust, and therefore make their work easier, by developing relational closeness, and, willy-nilly, they meet them more often. 'It's so much easier to co-operate with the contracted workers I meet frequently,' one of the agents admits.

Understanding the role of culture in intercultural relationship development

The role of culture emerges as another theme in people's perceptions of their intercultural relationships at work. The motives identified within this theme are: *fear of cultural differences*, *dislike of the others*, *learning about the other's culture* and *personal growth*.

Relational development is hindered by *fear of cultural differences*. Interaction is often seen in terms of intergroup rather than interpersonal, and the concept of nation is invoked. When faced with the other's ambiguous behavior, individuals make negative interpretations and conclude that the other is intentionally unfriendly due to their different nationality. The Polish respondents perceive that most of their Finnish colleagues are distant or even hostile towards them, and this is attributed to ignorance and negative stereotypes about Poland. The following incident recounted by a Polish respondent is an example of how an environmentally oriented behavior of refusing to share an object (Altman and Taylor 1973) serves to demarcate the borderline between 'us' and 'them' that is not to be crossed:

> During a break, our Polish friends used a coffee maker that belonged to their Finnish colleagues. They'd brought their own coffee powder, filters, and sugar; they only borrowed the appliance. Their Finnish colleagues didn't like that because they went to the shift supervisor to complain. The man very politely explained it to the guys that they weren't allowed to use the coffee maker. No

harm done, but you can tell that they don't like us.

The ability to make more accurate interpretations of the other's behavior and, therefore, the acceptance of the equal sophistication of his or her cultural reality, does not equate with having the motivation to interact with that person (see also Bennett 1993). *Dislike of the others* emerges as a motive that is holding some recruitment agents from developing closer ties with the Polish metal workers. They list behaviors that they dislike about the Poles: they communicate aggressively, insist on contacting the agency in the most trivial matters, always come to complain in large groups, and challenge the trustworthiness of the agency staff. The same respondents provide fairly sophisticated explanations for the Poles' behavior, but they still perceive the guest workers as irritating, and relationships with them - as a cumbersome necessity.

Cultural differences may also encourage interaction. The motive of *learning about the other's culture* emerges from the interviews with the Polish contracted workers and the employees of the Finnish agency alike. Being able to learn about different beliefs and behaviors is constructed as enriching one's working life. One of the interviewees says: 'I've always enjoyed being around people from different cultures [...]. It's much more rewarding than working with Finns only.' A Polish respondent states that despite the anguish of being separated from his family, he feels so excited about working with Finns that he would not be ready to leave home just yet. The participants talk about engaging in friendly exchanges at work where each other's national cultures are on the agenda. The recruitment agents and the recruited workers meet informally after work and discuss issues such as Polish and Finnish culture or adaptation to life in Finland.

Intercultural relationship development gives rise to, and is supported by, individual intercultural learning activities, such as learning the other's language or following the media for information related to the other's country. A Finnish respondent describes her learning projects: 'I study Polish whenever I have the time, and then anything on TV, documentaries and such, or if there's an article in a newspaper, I'll read it. I didn't use to pay attention to those Polish things, but these days I do.'

The respondents also use the assistance of persons that they regard as cultural experts, such as immigrants or the agency interpreters, in processing cultural information about the others. The Polish interpreter working at the agency reports being frequently approached by both her Finnish colleagues and the recruited Poles for cultural etiquette advice.

What is problematic about the motive of *learning about the other's culture* is that new cultural information is processed from the individuals' own cultural perspective. Some testimonials, however, reveal that intercultural relationship development promotes *personal growth*. Individuals who embrace the motive acknowledge the equal sophistication of different cultural realities, are highly motivated to interact with culturally different others and see these interactions as an opportunity to challenge and reconfigure one's own worldview. As a Finnish respondent states: 'You always get influences from the new people you meet, and in the long run you change yourself; this is something fruitful.'

Discussion

Although our respondents work in the recruitment industry where persons are seen as 'labor,' or are employed on the shop floor of a metal plant where work is mostly

individual and manual, and although they know that their intercultural interactions are only temporary, intercultural relationships still emerge as a prominent aspect of their working lives.

The intercultural workplace relationships that our respondents have developed are mostly collegial and located within small groups formed by a Finnish agent and a few Polish workers, or a few Polish and Finnish workers. Relational processes involve even more persons as the help of fellow nationals and cultural experts is enlisted. The importance of social support in the development of intercultural relationships has also been confirmed by intercultural marriage and friendship research (Chen 2002).

As predicted by social exchange theory (Altman and Taylor 1973), self-disclosure emerges as pivotal to relational growth. The lack of a common language hinders the development of closer ties as it severely limits the breadth and depth of exchanges. Intercultural workplace relationships demand more effort to develop because they imply the need for a variety of other relational behaviors that are not as efficient in exchanging personal information.

Our study demonstrates that the workplace context plays a crucial role in relational development, thus confirming earlier research (Sias and Cahill 1998). Closer ties develop between persons working on neighboring machines or sharing tasks. The character of the relationship between the recruitment agent and his or her recruited workers also encourages informal interaction. Work-related matters often serve as a pretext for initiating interaction. These findings carry practical implications for companies hiring foreign temporary workers. Providing culturally dissimilar employees with opportunities to work on joint projects, interact informally and learn each other's language would be rewarding for everyone involved.

The fact that individuals perceive their relational experiences in terms of motives supports social exchange theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978). Having motives implies experiencing needs; whether these are fulfilled or not may decide about the future course of relational maintenance. Different motives are experienced simultaneously; some respondents may lack the language to communicate and yet have a strong need to socialize in the workplace, some may dislike the culturally different others and yet feel the need to earn their respect. The evaluation of the different motives is not a straightforward process, which accounts for the process 'ebbing and flowing' as Altman and Taylor (1973) described. These contradictions could be examined further within the framework of relational dialectics (e.g. Baxter and Montgomery 1996).

The development of interpersonal workplace relationships is not driven by purely interpersonal reasons. A number of motives are instrumental, such as learning a foreign language or gaining the other's trust to improve co-operation. There may be other instrumental incentives that the respondents did not disclose. The agents may want to be on good terms with the migrants because their salary is affected by the number of workers they have been able to recruit and retain in employment. The Poles may want to use their connections with the agents to increase their negotiating power and secure good job contracts.

Experiences of intercultural relationship dynamics at work are affected by perceptions of the role of culture. Our findings are consistent with social identity and categorization theories (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner 1991), according to which individuals classify themselves and others into groups basing on readily available

features. Nationality and language are the key dimensions through which our respondents reify difference and commonality. This further ties in with the principle of homophily, or the idea that we tend to be attracted to and develop relationships with persons that we perceive to be similar to us (e.g. Duck 1994).

Perception of difference may lead to hostility. The Polish respondents complain that many of their Finnish colleagues are prejudiced against them. This is corroborated by a Finnish recruitment agent who describes how many Finnish companies refuse to hire Eastern European workers. Indeed, studies of Finns' attitudes to immigrants (e.g. Jaakkola 2005) indicate that Finns tend to have more negative opinions about newcomers from poorer post-communist economies.

Interpretations of the others' relational behaviors are also affected by cultural misunderstanding. The Polish respondents remark, for example, that their Finnish colleagues pretend not to notice them. The practice of 'not noticing the other' could be a feature of the traditional Finnish speech culture that values social tact and discretion (e.g. Carbaugh 2009). The Poles consider it rude not to acknowledge the other's presence and read this behavior as an act of snubbing. These observations could be reflected against Hall's (1976) concepts of *high-context communication* that relies on information in the physical context and *low-context communication* where most of the information is in explicit messages. The communication behavior of our Polish respondents appears to be more low-context, with a preference for openly showing one's reactions and verbally clearing out misunderstandings.

Cultural ideas about what constitutes appropriate and effective communication do evolve. Finnish speech culture has been, for example, changing quite rapidly due to the processes of modernization and urbanization (Wilkins and Isotalus 2009). This could explain the Poles' observation that that their younger Finnish colleagues are much more open and sociable.

While cultural tendencies exist, individual and contextual factors of the interaction should not be neglected. Interestingly enough, our respondents exhibit a tendency to rely on national stereotypes to describe and explain their own communication behavior, disregarding other contextual factors or personal preferences. The Polish respondents want to present themselves as more sociable than Finns, not acknowledging that their preoccupation with developing ties is also related to them being lonely guests in a host environment. The Finnish respondents emphasize that they are a 'silent nation,' although many of them appear to be quite extroverted.

Even when attraction to cultural differences is professed, new cultural information may still be processed superficially, with ethnocentric judgments made and national stereotypes amassed. This is exacerbated by the fact that many persons rely on limited interactions with members of the other culture, and gather information about them through observation, discussions with fellow nationals, and advice received from not always competent informants. Such strategies may produce incomplete or distorted knowledge about the other (Knobloch 2008).

These findings could be reflected against Bennett's (1986, 1993, 2004) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity that organizes individuals' increasingly complex experience of cultural difference into six stages (*denial*, *defense*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *integration*). The first three stages are ethnocentric as one examines the social world through the lens of his or her own culture. Underlying the

move from *minimization* to *acceptance* is a shift to an ethnorelativist point of view in that one comes to experience their own culture in the context of other cultures. Our findings point to *defense* as the predominant orientation, marked by the tendency to polarize into 'us and them' and glorify one's culture while belittling others. Some respondents are at the next stage of *minimization* that entails de-emphasizing the differences by highlighting the universal character of all human behavior. We can also find examples of *acceptance*, whereby other cultures are experienced as equally sophisticated as one's own. As the motive of *dislike of the others* shows, accepting the fact that there are culturally different ways of organizing human experience does not imply agreement or liking. The motive of *personal growth* with the ability to shift frames of reference indicates a further development towards the stage of *adaptation*.

Since most of our respondents appear to embrace an ethnocentric worldview, one could ask whether intercultural relationship development will ever proceed for them. Or is it through developing closeness that negative and simplified perceptions of the other's culture can be elaborated? This is an issue that calls for further investigation, preferably with a longitudinal study design. Our findings yield only limited insights into the matter. One of our Polish respondents describes how he has developed a friendship with his Finnish colleague that pivots on their shared experience of being parents. Research on intercultural friendship (e.g. Gudykunst 1985) indicates that friends see each other as individuals rather than cultural beings, basing their union on deep commonality rather than superficial demographic features. However, the above mentioned respondent does not show any evidence of having generalized the effects of his intercultural friendship onto his whole worldview. Those interviewees who do experience culture from an ethnorelativist stance seem to have brought this worldview into the workplace rather than have developed it through their intercultural workplace interactions.

It would be naïve to divorce our findings from their social and political context. In her pamphlet 'Näkymätön Kylä' ['Invisible Village,' own translation], Anna Kontula (2010) reports on the field study that she conducted in a settlement established for foreign migrants employed in the construction of the nuclear plant in Olkiluoto in Finland. Kontula spent a month in the improvised village hidden into the forest, sharing metal barrack accommodation with Polish builders. According to Kontula, the negative attitudes of Finns towards foreign migrants should be examined as an outcome of institutional racism in Finland that sanctions and perpetuates a physical, linguistic, legal and economic divide between guest workers and the mainstream society.

The relational activities that our respondents told us about do not happen on a level playing field; they are characterized by a sense of social and economic injustice, attempts at agency and maintaining humanity in a situation that objectifies people. Within this light, some of the findings require a new reading. The migrant workers' reliance on the concept of national culture could be a strategy to build a positive group identity, to regain continuity and a sense of self-worth (see also Mendoza 2005). The Finnish metal workers may show reservation towards migrants because they feel threatened in a situation where foreign professionals are brought in to do the same work for a smaller pay.

It is notable, however, that people in our study have been developing interpersonal relationships. The Finnish recruitment agents who embrace the motives of *earning the other's respect* and *validating the other* may even be taking a stand against

the predominant discourse where migrants are rendered as any raw material needed in production (e.g. Viitala and Mäkipelkola 2005). Kontula's (2010) representation of the relations between migrant workers, their employers and members of the mainstream society is a radical one. Our study conducted from an interpersonal communication perspective reveals that these relationships are more complex and nuanced.

A year after the data for the project were gathered, the world plunged into an economic downturn and the demand for foreign workers in the construction and industry sectors in Finland decreased. Many of our Polish respondents returned home. Since 2010, foreign labor migration has been recovering in Europe, and is expected to continue to grow in the coming decades (Appave and Laczko 2011).

Research evaluation

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) the relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology of qualitative research renders the positivist/postpositivist concepts of validity and reliability incongruent. Instead, they propose that the inquiry should be judged as successful if it fulfills the standards of credibility, transferability, transparency, and authenticity. A major limitation of our study is that the Finnish metal workers interacting with the Poles were not interviewed. However, the abductive method of inquiry, with its preoccupation with apparently anomalous phenomena and repeatedly inspected interpretations, was helpful in constructing a balanced presentation and avoiding anecdotalism. We strived at providing a thick description of the social phenomenon (Geertz 1973) that passes the criterion of credibility. The readers can transfer this interpretation to other settings and assess its usefulness.

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About the Authors

Malgorzata Lahti is a doctoral student in Speech Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland. Her dissertation focuses on interpersonal communication phenomena in culturally diverse workplaces.

Maarit Valo is Professor in Speech Communication in the Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include workplace communication, technologically mediated interpersonal communication, and communicative competence as part of professional expertise.

Authors' Address

University of Jyväskylä
Dept of Communication (Z)
P.O. Box 35
FI-40014
Finland
Email: malgorzata.lahti@jyu.fi, maarit.valo@jyu.fi