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Experiencing Cultural Contact at Work: An Exploration of Immigrants' Perceptions of Work in  
Finland

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Cultural adaptation is a paramount concern for researchers, policy makers, organizations, communities, nations, and for individuals in the process of adapting. Scholars have produced a rich body of research on how this process takes place, identified positive and negative effects of the process, and offered alternatives to current adaptation models (e.g., Berry, 1990; Chun & Choi, 2003; Croucher, 2008, 2011; Kim, 2001; Kraidy, 2005; Ye, 2006).

Researchers examining the underpinnings of cultural adaptation have overwhelmingly adopted Kim's (2001) theory of cultural adaptation. Kim (2001) defined cultural adaptation as "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (p. 31). This process is a multi-step process, involving the enculturation, deculturation and acculturation of newcomers to a culture, where the ultimate goal is complete assimilation into the new culture (Kim, 2001). However, complete assimilation is theoretically impossible, as newcomers to a culture may not be accepted by the dominant culture, may not be able to completely assimilate, and/or may not want to completely assimilate (Croucher, 2008, Gordon, 1964; Kim, 2001; Smolicz & Secombe, 2003).

Instead of an end-goal of complete assimilation, numerous intercultural/cross-cultural theorists have posited other ideas to better explain and/or predict the newcomer experience. Kraidy (2005) in his discussion of hybridity explained how various elements of culture, race, language, and ethnicity fuse together to form new hybrid spaces. These hybrid spaces incorporate elements of various cultures including the original (typically minority) and the dominant/surrounding cultural milieu. Building upon Gadamer (1960/1975), Kramer (2000) argued newcomers to a culture continually build upon their knowledge base and fuse/integrate their previous cultural knowledge with newly acquired cultural knowledge. In this study, we

draw on cultural fusion theory (e.g. Callahan, 2009, 2011) to frame our treatment of the integration processes, and to also better understand identity formation. In its application of hermeneutic philosophy, cultural fusion theory does not presume a preferred outcome of cultural contact. Fusion does not rely on efficiency as a goal but draws on a view of interpersonal interactions as producing endless integration and innovation (Callahan, 2009). Integration is therefore approached as a highly dynamic, complex, and unpredictable process of making sense of cultural differences (Callahan, 2009). The theory addresses the problems of traditional linear theorizing by attending to human experience and learning as emergent, situated, additive and holistic (e.g. Callahan, 2011; Kramer, 2000).

In this study, we examine how immigrants in knowledge jobs in Finland construct and negotiate perceptions of work in their everyday intercultural interactions in the workplace. We define knowledge jobs as jobs that do not produce products, but are responsible for creative output. In Finland, such positions are considered “brain-jobs,” or jobs that are more intellectually focused and less physical. In recent decades, Finland has established its position as a receiving country for global migration flows, following in the steps of the more multiculturally experienced Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark. Finland has traditionally been a country of emigration but in the 1990s, immigration to Finland started to increase due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia and the former Yugoslavia (Alitolppa-Niitamo & Söderling, 2005). The present-day immigrant population of Finland is heterogeneous and includes a number of highly-educated career-oriented professionals. This development reflects the transformations of the Finnish labor market, where the trend towards knowledge work has been increasingly pronounced, adding an extra emphasis on individuals’ educational background and professional competencies (e.g.,

Kasvio, Virtanen, & Kandolin, 2010). Attracting and retaining highly-skilled foreign experts has become a social and national imperative in Finland, an idea continuously emphasized by agencies such as the Finnish Ministry of Labor (Jaakkola, 2009). However, the integration of these persons into the organizations that employ them and into Finnish society remains largely unexplored.

The workplace plays a significant role in integrating immigrants into the host society (Croucher, 2008). It is a vital communication context where persons with different cultural backgrounds convene and engage in meaningful interactions as they follow the same guidelines, work towards shared goals, and develop interpersonal relationships (Muir, 2007). These interactions in the workplace may shape immigrants' perceptions of their social world and work values, thus altering their perception of the significance and purpose of work.

### **Method and Participants**

The 12 participants for this study were immigrants working and living in Finland. They included individuals from a variety of nations like Ukraine, Albania, Poland, Nepal, Spain, Greece, Kenya, Colombia, and the United States. Participants were recruited from various knowledge jobs: technology, medical, education, and engineering. Of the 12 participants, seven were men and five were women. The average age of the participants was 31.33 years of age. The average length of time the participants had lived in Finland was 5.15 years. All interviews were conducted in a location agreed upon by the interviewee and the interviewer. The interviews were conducted in one (or a mixture) of the following languages: English and/or Finnish. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. Data were analyzed qualitatively using Owen's (1984) analytical scheme. Owen's analytical process focuses on three criteria to identifying a theme in

qualitative data: 1) recurrence, 2) repetition, and 3) forcefulness. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Based on this analysis, three themes emerged: evolving linguistic, professional, and cultural identities as affecting meaningfulness of work.

### **Language Competencies and Work**

Language competencies were consequential to how our respondents constructed the meaning of work, or made attributions concerning work’s significance and purpose (Lair, Shenoy, McClellan, & McGuire, 2008). Language competencies may become relevant in a variety of workplace interactions along the continuum from task accomplishment to relationship building; on top of being an interactional matter, issues of language proficiency are also deeply enmeshed with dominant ideologies defining what languages are perceived to be unmarked, expected, and valued at work (Hua, 2014).

In their discursive interpretations of work, our participants overwhelmingly construed their low proficiency in Finnish as a challenge in those aspects of workplace interactions that make work meaningful. Work may be perceived as a fundamental source of personal worth as it gives a sense of direction and achievement, enables personal growth, and conveys a sense of status and value of one’s occupation (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). This understanding became accentuated in our participants’ accounts as they reflected on how their poor Finnish skills limited their chances of advancing their careers and thriving in a profession for which they had trained.

Insufficient Finnish skills were experienced as hindering one’s expressions of professionalism through creating barriers to the efficient performance of everyday tasks and

duties. Our respondents talked about having to carefully monitor Finnish-language workplace interactions to ensure understanding, feeling anxious about and even refraining from speaking out in meetings, or taking time to write emails and documents, often with results that were far from perfect. Some of our data indicated organizations did not always properly acknowledge the language learner status of immigrant employees, to the extent that these persons missed vital information concerning corporate practices and policies, and their own responsibilities. Despite their low language proficiency, Finnish was routinely chosen as the language of orientation, trainings, meetings, professional guidance, and in-house documentation. One had to resort to other strategies of getting important information, such as relying on the help of a friendly colleague for interpreting and translation.

Low Finnish proficiency was associated with the experience of being perceived as untrustworthy, inefficient and unprofessional, and therefore having one's occupational status undermined. For instance, Sofia from Spain and Epaminondas from Greece, who were both dentists, felt their lack of fluency in Finnish stirred distrust in others. They talked about their own and other immigrant colleagues' experiences of dental assistants and patients refusing to collaborate with or be treated by foreign dentists. These accounts resonate with previous research emphasizing that immigrants' professional expertise is often mistaken for and assessed on the basis of their sociolinguistic performance, although they may only be in the process of learning the dominant workplace language (Holmes & Riddiford, 2010).

Our respondents also framed work in terms of relational development and inclusion in a network of interpersonal relationships. They discussed how their low proficiency in Finnish became an obstacle in informal workplace interactions. Zoryana, a Ukrainian marketing assistant, complained about feeling like an outsider as her colleagues, themselves lacking

confidence to interact in English, engaged in only simple and superficial exchanges in Finnish with her on the topics they expected her to be able to converse. Gabriel, a Colombian researcher, pondered about how non-speakers of Finnish might be subtly excluded from forms of socializing, such as when she was not invited to participate in a work outing to the theatre because the play that her workmates were going to see was in Finnish. The opportunity for relationship building with colleagues, clients or customers is one of the core characteristics of people's perceptions of meaningful work (Cheney et al., 2008). From the perspective of immigrant employees' organizational experiences, some of the linguistic choices and practices in the predominantly Finnish-speaking work group may act as a form of social exclusion, greatly limiting their chances of developing relationships and showing them that, despite their apparently shared organizational membership, they are troublesome, incomplete or undesirable group members.

While the discussion so far has centered on how low proficiency in Finnish may be detrimental to experiencing one's work as meaningful, we also found that native speakers of languages regarded as desirable in international business circles made sense of their work in terms of capitalizing on their language competencies. These persons talked about a heightened awareness of the market value of their first language and of the special position in the organization this had brought them. Zoryana admitted that being a native speaker of Russian was the main reason for receiving an internship position that entailed producing marketing materials for Russian customers. Deacon, a native speaker of English employed in sales and marketing, felt that "just doing English" had become his "specialty" at work. The management in his company encouraged him to speak English with the rest of the staff as this helped in the pursuit of the highly desirable status as a "multinational" global organization. Such commodification of

language (Heller, 2010) could be read as a manifestation of the managerial ideology of diversity management that emphasizes the meritocratic worth of individually possessed cultural and social capital. In this case, it is one's linguistic capital accorded special value in the globalized new economy (Heller, 2010) – the economy where ideas about the significance and purpose of work are intertwined with issues of language competencies more than ever before.

### **Professional Identities and Work**

Immigrants undergoing environmental changes and personal transformation often have to (re)establish their professional identity and (re)negotiate the meaning of work in the new workplace. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) reported how immigrant professionals adapt to the host culture more quickly than other immigrant groups. Thus, professional identity and the meaning of work transcend workplaces and shape immigrants' social life.

Work is seen as an important mean to gain acceptance and respect from the host society. The majority of the interviewees felt they were highly respected as immigrant professionals in Finland. For instance, Jambo, a Kenyan doctoral researcher working at a university, described how Finns are usually “pleasantly surprised” after discovering his profession. The host culture is essential in the cross-cultural adaptation process (Boekeštljn, 1988). People from the host culture tend to have positive attitude towards immigrants who possess special skills and do not take away local jobs (Grant & Westwood, 1996). Thus, professional immigrants are more likely to be perceived as constructive to the host society because of their professional status. In this sense, work has significant social meanings for immigrants in terms of facilitating self-esteem and obtaining approval from the host culture. As the working-age population in Finland is declining (Łobodzińska, 2011), further increase in the social significance of professional immigrants is

likely to be witnessed. Consequently, the hospitality and recognition from the host country may contribute to immigrant's adaptation process and career success.

Possessing only professional jobs is helpful in upholding one's professional identity. Losing the human and social capital from the original culture, immigrants are more disadvantaged in the job market of the host country (Fang, Zikic, & Novicevic, 2009). A common remark from interviewees is that finding a professional job in Finland is challenging. The unemployment rate among immigrants is 21.4%, almost three times as high as that of the general Finnish population (TEM, 2011). Unemployment and underemployment are more common among immigrants, which leads to shame, frustration, and bitterness. In a study of Chinese professional immigrants in Australia, Cooke, Zhang, and Wang (2013) discovered one-third of them accepted jobs below their qualification in the early stage of their careers. This disheartens professional immigrants especially when their foreign obtained qualifications are discounted or devalued in the new country. An example of this is when Zoryana, acquired her diploma in Ukraine, but was denied a college teaching job from because "they need a FINNISH diploma for that." Ostap, a Ukrainian automation engineer, decided to pursue another degree in Finland in order to be "taken more seriously" by the employers. One's professional identity is greatly threatened if professional immigrants are lumped with unskilled workers (Grant & Westwood, 1996). As for educated and skillful immigrants, a job without intellectual challenges is perceived more of a way to survive rather than a "real job" (Clair, 1996) which makes it more likely that immigrants will retreat from the host country when failing to find satisfying jobs (Heikkilä & Peltonen, 2002).

Work is one of the strongest attachments immigrants have to the host society, especially for those who migrate for work reasons. A number of participants experienced short-period

employment, which decreased their motivation to assimilate fully into the organization or the host country. For example, Zoryana, working as an intern with no further employment possibility, experienced weak membership with the organization: I feel that my place is only as an intern, nothing more, even though I'm kind of also invited for those meetings, but still it's like I come and then I will leave when my internship ends, so it's like that because it would be nice to continue working there but there's no ways, no possibility to stay

Epaminondas, who came to Finland with a fix termed one-year work contract explained:

I don't know if I will stay here forever, so, obviously you cannot invest all the energy.

Also the other people can sense you have this feeling that you are not sure about whether you are 100% here or not... I don't even seek uh... to be accepted more if I'm gonna leave in a year.

Low expectation for a renewed contract is a barrier for temporary employees to stay loyal to the organization. Perceived job security correlates positively with organizational commitment (Westover, Westover, & Westover, 2010). Research also shows a negative relationship between organizational commitment and intent to leave (Liou, 2009). Consequently, employees have higher intent to leave the organization when they perceive less job security. For immigrant workers, intent to leave the current organization could lead to retreat entirely from the host country. Thus, immigrants who expect to stay only for a short period are less committed to fully adapting to the host country.

### **Cultural Identities and Work**

Immigrants' workplaces provide a fruitful environment to evolve and negotiate their cultural identities. Many respondents talked about the Finnish way of working and how workplace interactions and practices differed from their home country. As these individuals learned new

ways of doing things in their new cultural and working environment, adopted some new cultural patterns to their daily life, and expanded their views on work, their cultural identities continued to develop (Kim, 2001).

What emerged from the interviews were respondents' experiences of low level of power distance in the workplace interactions. In the workplace context, power distance refers to the way status differences and social hierarchies are approached and dealt with in the corporate culture (Ting-Toomey, 2010). Several respondents described Finnish workplaces as being equal, casual, and relaxed working environments where titles, formality, and hierarchy are not noticeably present. For example, Deacon was amazed at his workplace's casualty and how the company works without formal supervision:

It really feels like there is not titles in my opinion, you know it's not like when the CEO comes everybody stands straight and tucks their shirt in, I mean he is really casual as well and it's kind of cool to see how well the company functions when cause he is gone almost all the time travelling.

The lower level of power distance was generally experienced in workplace interactions when talking to superiors or clients. Sofia noticed that patients did not call her by her official title, which was something new to her. She described how low power distance is apparent in her workplace relationships in the following way:

This is very positive, sometimes in Spain, I mean I was a dentist but I didn't feel confident with myself, because of the boss says something bad, here in Finland that everything is super equal, and boss and assistant make me feel like a dentist. Have my patients, make decisions myself.

What is noteworthy in Sofia's experience is her growing self-confidence as a dentist and feelings of autonomy resulting from interactions with her supervisor and assistant. Zoryana also pointed out interactions with colleagues and being treated as an individual made her value herself more. One can see how in the cases above, work becomes meaningful through psychological and social mechanisms such as self-efficacy and self-esteem (see Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Power distance reflects on the dynamics of supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace. Epaminondas explained the casualty in sending emails had been a challenge, especially when writing to his supervisor. His experience illustrates his effort to adapt common practices to his communication behavior:

I wasn't used to having some many things, having communicate with so many people through emails, through work. They do it very casually, which is a little bit surprising to me because consider writing an email to my boss would be like for me in the past, I would be, one or two hours process. You know for ten lines of email. It's not that I write slow but I would have to phrase, try to make it just right. Now, it doesn't happen. Like the first time I was starting with "Hei" to my boss, I sent it and I felt weird.

Our respondents also talked about high work efficiency and short working hours in Finnish workplaces. For instance, Sunil, a Nepalese computer programmer, thought the importance of work quality was emphasized in his workplace as the way of working was "work smart than work hard". Zoryana and Gabriel felt they started to appreciate their own free time more. In the following interview excerpt, Gabriel explained how he adopted some of the common practices from his workplace he found suitable for himself:

People start work early in the morning and lunch is very early too what I'm used to. And also people leave early to go home so basically everything has shifted about two hours

from what I'm used to. But I kinda like it because I'm a morning person so I can always start early and I can work with them and I think it's great to go out from work early in the afternoon so you have time to be with the family and actually do other stuff besides working. Maybe the lunch part is the one I can't really get used to.

Relationships in the workplace have a great impact on making work and life meaningful (Cheney et al., 2008). Our data suggest interpersonal relationships at work and outside are significant in immigrants' adaptation. Relationships have been recognized as important factors for employee adjustment and well-being (Sias, 2009). Furthermore, having social support from supervisors and colleagues can assist immigrants' adjustment (Pasca & Wagner, 2011).

Several respondents viewed Finnish workplaces as professional environments where emphasis was often on the individual. Some respondents viewed relationships in their workplaces mostly as work-related. They felt work and personal life are two separate things in Finland. One of the respondents, Gabriel, felt relationships with colleagues, especially outside the office, were important for adaptation and integration: "I think that it is very important to have different activities and to meet people in other environments and not just work". Ostap reflected on differences in workplace relationships by pointing out "Finnish and Ukrainian ways of behavior, they are completely different so in Ukraine I got all of my colleagues like friends". Ostap's words describe the value of collectivism, which he considers as a part of his cultural identity. Overall, both Gabriel's and Ostap's narratives highlight the importance of being part of the group in the workplace. These interpretations are consistent with indications that immigrants' integration in the workplace and the immediate work team seem to be positively affected by relational communication and different group memberships (Nelson, 2014), both of which consequently influence the construction of meaningfulness of work.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examined how immigrants' perceptions of work are shaped by their everyday intercultural interactions in the workplace. Three issues emerged: linguistic, professional, and cultural identities affect meaningfulness of work. First, low language proficiency is detrimental to fulfilling one's role as competent or trustworthy worker, building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and advancing one's career. In this sense, work serves as a source of self-worth and immigrants with low level of Finnish skills found it difficult to prove their values to the host society.

Second, work is regarded as the reason to be accepted and respected by the locals and an essential attachment to the host society. Not competing with locals in the low-end job market, immigrants in Finland with "brain jobs" are highly appreciated and valued as they are portrayed as contributors to the economy. In addition, for immigrants who migrated for work reasons, work is the foremost attachment they have to the host society. Ending of the work often leads to full retreatment from the host country.

Third, participants explained how they were continually adapting to the work cultural environment. For them, the workplace served as an important environment for building relationships which assisted their adaptation. One of the key issues was work formality in interactions, which for many of the participants created a dissonance between their native and new cultural environment. In the end, participants fused their native work norms with those of Finland which had an impact on their perceptions of work and its meaningfulness in life. Moreover, the role of interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging in the workplace emerged when constructing meanings of work.

As an individual's career is under the influence of a country's socioeconomic context, this study contributes to the meaning of work literature by examining situations immigrants in knowledge jobs face when adapting to a new cultural environment. As the Finnish labor market continues to rely on immigrant labor force, understanding immigrants' perceptions of work becomes an increasing necessity. The results of this analysis reveal that work has unique meanings to immigrants in Finland and it is a crucial factor for immigrants' adaptation and integration to the Finnish society. Work can help in preventing immigrants' exclusion from the community and support them in becoming part of it. In addition, work shapes immigrants' identities by influencing how they view and value themselves as both immigrants and individuals. It is essential that organizations take immigrants' views on work into consideration to better facilitate interpersonal and organizational relationships and try to find common ways to combine different workplace ideals and values to increase productivity, cohesion, and harmony.

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