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# Perceived challenges living and integrating into Finnish society: A study among immigrants in Finland

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**Abstract:** The number of immigrants living in Finland has significantly increased since the 1990s. It can be challenging to live and integrate into a new society. This study explores the challenges immigrants face living and integrating into Finnish society. Drawing on data collected from 103 immigrants living in Finland, this study shows that the challenges immigrants face integrating into Finnish society can be classified into four main categories: (1) language barrier, (2) discrimination in employment opportunities, (3) racism and inequality, and (4) fewer opportunities of integration. Implications and recommendations are briefly considered.

**Keywords:** Integration, Immigrants, Finland, Host society, Assimilation, Challenges.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the consequences of globalization is that it has fostered migration flows into Western countries (Skaliotis & Thorougood, 2007). According to the World Migration Report (2020), the number of international migrants globally was 150 million in 2000 and 272 million in 2020. Some of the factors that have contributed to increased migration flows include “increasing international and domestic inequalities, the persistent demand for high- and low-skilled migrant labour in the segmented labour markets of wealthy societies, and the lack of opportunities, population growth, oppression, and violent conflict in developing countries” (Czaika & de Haas, 2014). International migration has led to an unprecedented increase in the degree of immigrant diversity in Europe, a situation that has been referred to as “super-diversity” by Vertovec (2007). Super diversity has been welcomed with mixed feelings in most Western countries. In addition, it has led to several concerns in the receiving countries (Skaliotis & Thorougood, 2007). One of such concerns in the host country is the successful integration of immigrants into the society and social cohesion (Barra, Contucci, Sandell & Vernia, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2022).

It can be challenging to live and integrate into a new society. Discussions about the integration of immigrants in Europe have intensified since the beginning of the refugee crisis of 2015, which witnessed an unprecedented influx of immigrants, especially refugees, into European soil. Immigrants face a lot of challenges that can stand as barriers to their integration process in the host society, and this study aims to explore what these challenges are in a sample of immigrants from more than 40 nationalities living in Finland. Guided by theories of integration, assimilation, and migration, this study utilizes open-ended surveys as an instrument for data collection and thematic analysis as an analytical strategy to answer the following research question:

RQ: *What type of challenges do immigrants experience integrating into Finnish society?*

This understanding is crucial for the Finnish government, NGOs, public authorities, and other stakeholders in their effort to facilitate and improve integration services and for developing policy on this subject. In addition, this understanding represents the foundation to challenge or enhance existing integration models.

### 1.1. Integration theories

To our knowledge, the idea of integration was first conceptualised by Berry in his immigrant acculturation model in the 1970s (Berry, 1997), giving rise to a bi-dimensional approach contrary to

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the zero-sum approach. In contemporary terms, assimilation has evolved to mean giving up one's culture of origin while taking the culture of the host society, and integration is seen as a way of maintaining a close distance in both directions. In other words, becoming bicultural instead of monocultural.

In recent years, the term and operationalization of integration have also been debated and scrutinized. Some provocatively argue that integration functions as a neoliberal and neocolonial project (Schinkel, 2017). On the other hand, Schinkel appears to rule out the notion of using integration as an analytical tool to better comprehend situations and phenomena that arise as a result of immigration and that it is throwing out the baby with the bathwater (Klarenbeek, 2019). We agree with Klarenbeek (2019) that we should conduct an empirical investigation into people and institutions in a post-immigration context, both from the point of receiving society (e.g., Nshom & Khalimzoda, 2020) and from the point of view of immigrants (e.g., Nshom, Khalimzoda, Sadaf, & Shaymardanov, 2022). Integration in this paper is conceptualised as an adaptation strategy to mean adjustment and feeling at home. It is the process of socialisation and change, through which newcomers to the society cope with the new surroundings in all its dimensions (segments), such as the people of the country, languages, different ethnic groups, customs, laws, the climate of the country, education system and labour market, to list a few.

In the next parts of this article, we will also discuss other valuable concepts that enhance our understanding of how immigrants cope with post-relocation change. These include transnationalism, segmented assimilation, and social networks.

## **1.2. Transnationalism**

Heightened interconnectivity and multiple links between people and institutions across nation-states bring the evidence of living in multiple spaces at the same time and therefore push the idea of transnationalism forward. Communities with such tight relations that cross national and geographical borders are called transnational communities. Members of these communities are considered to belong to both the country that they reside in and to the place from which they emigrated (Lee, 2009; Awada, 2022). Immigrants invest in their relations and status in the host society by not abandoning similar relations in the country of origin, thus, benefiting from double citizenship possibilities and resources available to citizens, also paying the high-effort bill of living in the juncture between two or more cultures. Transnationalism has affected and will continue to affect the way we understand integration.

## **1.3. Segmented assimilation**

Segmented assimilation focuses on the notion that immigrants take a different path in how they adjust to life, and they adapt differently into different segments of society. Lee (2009) described segmented assimilation theory in her paper on sociological theories of immigrant integration and stated that it asserts that immigrants might adapt to one of the social sectors available instead of limiting all immigrant groups to adapting into one single uniform host society. In other words, newcomers to society usually adopt the behaviours that are most relevant to their everyday lives, such as clothes, language, and other routines. While acculturation is unavoidable, individuals will keep components of their culture and will not shed their socialized identities (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Brinkman & Jacobi, 2020). Minority groups living in mainstream society can provide new immigrant ethnic groups with significant expertise and resources. As a result, newly arrived immigrant groups who face discrimination and prejudice from the host society may opt to integrate into one of these minority ethnic cultures. The theory highlights many possible barriers and contexts of the incorporation as well (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Moreover, the characteristics of the existing immigrant groups at the time of new immigrant arrival are considered important. The presence of opportunities or barriers and even the residential areas, which are mostly populated by the mainstream host society or minority groups, are also considered important in the successful socio-cultural interchange (Lee, 2009).

## **1.4. Social capital and social networks**

In social science, the concept of social capital involves the potential of individuals to obtain benefits and find solutions to problems through membership in a social network based on collective social trust (Heisler, 2000). Social capital is determined around three dimensions: interconnected networks of relationships between individuals and groups, levels of trust that characterize these relationships, and resources or uses that are both gained and transferred by the integrity of social relations and participation (Poteyeva, 2018). Sociologists state that the capability of ethnic communities to support fellow immigrants and the development of ethnic enclaves could not occur without the pre-existence of social networks and social capital among immigrant groups (Lee, 2009). For instance, newly arrived immigrants oftentimes rely on their immediate ethnic communities for reference or other needs. These positive network mechanisms help, for example, in the labour market, where previously established immigrants assist newly arrived ones to enter the mainstream employment sector (Lee, 2009). However, ethnic communities are not always helpful in the adaptation path. For example, accumulated negative relations with mainstream society can play a negative role in the integration process of the newly arrived individual or group. Circulated biases and the perception of discrimination lead to more

tight relations with the ethnic community and loss of contact with the mainstream society, which causes ghettos and parallel societies. Therefore, it is important for an immigrant to objectively observe the pre-existing ethnic communities and to build social networks among the host mainstream society without the mediation of ethnic communities.

### **1.5. Immigration in Finland**

Finland gained its independence from the Russian Empire in 1917. In terms of immigration, it caused several thousands of eastern Karelians migrated to Finland by 1922. Also, Russians, in large numbers, running from the Bolshevik Revolution, immigrated to Finland for asylum. According to the Finnish Ministry of Interior, there were 33 000 Russian citizens in Finland in 1920 (Kauranen & Tuori, 2002). Meanwhile, the winter war (during the Second World War) and the continuing war in Finland caused most of the Russians to move out of Finland to Paris and Prague, as well as Sweden. The genesis of mass migration to Finland can be traced back to post-World War II, where the Karelian population moved to Finland from the territories lost to the USSR and 1990s with the arrival of Ingrian Finns who were returning from Russia and Estonia after the collapse of Soviet Union. According to Statistics Finland (2019), the immigrant population in Finland has shifted from about 0.8 % of the total population in 1990 to about 7% of the total population in 2019. By the end of 2019, there were up to 423,494 persons with a foreign background living in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2020). Among the different ethnic groups, Estonian and Russian immigrants are the two largest immigrant groups in the country, followed by immigrants from Iraq, Somalia, former Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Sweden, Afghanistan, Turkey, Thailand, India, Iran, Syria, Sweden, and Philippines (Statistics Finland, 2020).

Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and the Schengen area in 2001. These moves also led to an increase in the number of Europeans moving to live in Finland. Even though Finland has often and traditionally been described as a homogenous society (see Ervasti, 2004; Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 2001), it is evident that the Finnish society is ethnically and culturally diverse. This study is an attempt to understand the challenges immigrants experience living and integrating into Finnish society. The short glimpse into the history of immigration in Finland helps to locate our study in its context.

### **1.6. Integration and policy in Finland**

According to Koskela (2014), the Finnish integration policy can be described as being “labour market-oriented”. This is evident in the fact that the Ministry of Employment and the Economy oversees integration issues in the country and the fact that integration training is only offered to those unemployed. This approach is founded on the belief that if immigrants can enter the labour market, the social and cultural aspects of integration will subsequently follow. According to Koskela (2014), “Integration training includes language studies, assistance in looking for a job, on-the-job training and/or further education to update one’s professional skills to the requirements of Finnish working society” (p. 9). The different municipalities are responsible for the initial assessment of integration needs for each immigrant arriving at their municipality and for the development of a personal integration plan in collaboration with the local Employment and Economic Development Office and the Social Insurance Institution. The personal integration plan serves as an official agreement between the immigrant and the official of the local Employment and Economic Development Office on the type of education and language and vocational training the immigrant will need to take in order to support their integration process.

It is important to note that not every immigrant qualifies for this integration support. For example, international students do not qualify because of their residence status. In addition, immigrants who have come to Finland for work or who have managed to secure a job shortly after arrival do not have access to the free Finnish language course. These groups of immigrants often rely on free Finnish language courses offered by NGOs. To qualify for integration support, you must be 18 years old and above, you must be unemployed and be registered as a recipient of unemployment benefit. In addition, this lasts only 3 to 5 years from the day of arrival in Finland (Koskela, 2014). Finnish integration policy is not just on paper. Despite the criticism (Laakkonen, 2021), it has been successfully implemented to a certain degree. However, despite these efforts by the state authorities and NGOs, the experiences of immigrants living and integrating into Finnish society are not without challenges. Very little research can be found that focuses on understanding the challenges faced by an ethnically diverse sample of immigrants.

Integration has been acknowledged as a two-way, ongoing process where also society changes with the changing diversity. According to Hytti and Paananen (2003), the Finnish word that is often used to refer to the term integration is “kotoutuminen”, coined in the 1990s. The Finnish version of the term is unique, translated as “domestic comfort” and “feeling at home”. Closely related is “kotouttaminen”, meaning the policies and actions enacted to facilitate this process. Both words are derived from Koti, “home”. This understanding of the term is also echoed in the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (number 493/1999), which was first

enacted in 1999 and revised several times subsequently. The Act sets and defines the legal framework and guidelines for receiving immigrants into the Finnish society, which aims:

*To promote the integration, equality and freedom of choice of immigrants through measures which help them to acquire the essential knowledge and skills they need to function in society and to ensure support and care for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of temporary protection in the context of a mass influx (p.1).*

*Integration is defined in the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (number 493/1999) as the “personal development of immigrants, aimed at participation in working life and society while preserving their own language and culture...” (p. 1).*

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedure and participants

An open-ended survey was used as an instrument to collect data for this study. According to Swart (2019), Surveying with open-ended questions can offer the researcher rich, unconstrained participant responses to broad questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their perspectives using their language, terms, and expressions. Open-ended questions, therefore, provide participants with the freedom to respond as they think appropriate, enabling them to determine their answers and use their own words, potentially encouraging them to share more personal and genuine perspectives. (p. 2)

The qualitative survey was distributed through the social media platform Facebook among immigrants living in Finland. The survey was completely anonymous and conducted on a voluntary basis without the promise of any compensation. The questions revolved around the challenges those immigrants encounter in Finnish society. There was no word limit for the participants to elaborate on the probed questions. In addition, the questionnaire also collected information on participants' age, gender, nationality, level of education, residency status, and length of stay in Finland. Each participant signed an informed consent form approved by the institutional review board before data collection.

A total of 103 immigrants from 41 countries participated in the study. Asylum seekers and refugees were not included in the study. This is because this study was aimed at other long-term immigrants living in Finland. The integration experiences of refugees and newly arrived migrants have dominated public debates and academic research in recent years. The integration experiences of other long-term migrants have been largely neglected (OECD, 2018). According to the data, 25.2 % of participants had a student status (exchange students were excluded from this study), 29 % had a work permit, 31 % had a permanent residence, and 14.6 % had acquired Finnish citizenship. All participants were living in Finland for at least one year at the time of data collection. The mean length of stay in Finland was 6 years. 4% had a high school certificate, 38.8 % had a bachelor's degree, 51.5 % had a master's degree, and 5.8 % had a doctorate. Out of the (n=103), 38 % of participants were men, while 61 % were women. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 58, and the mean age of participants was 33.4 years. Participants came from different parts of the world, such as Africa (46.6%), Asia (25.2%), Europe (19.4%), North America (5.8%), South America (2%), and Australia (1%).

### 2.2. Thematic Analysis

The data were exposed to thematic analysis in the current study. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). Thematic analysis extricates the underlying concepts and pinpoints the themes in the data, along with examining and recording patterns in the analysis (Tjandra, Omar, Williams Jr & Ensor, 2013). As a method, it is best suited for studies that focus on discovering themes by using interpretations. It also helps in interpreting the data by elucidating in detail the diverse range of responses (Boyatzis, 1998). He further elaborated that in thematic analysis, themes in the data are identified, analyzed, and reported.

It helps in organizing themes and interpreting the topic under consideration (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which incurs accuracy along with enhancing the entire meaning of the research with intricacy.

Braun and Clarke (2006) defined various phases of thematic analysis. In this research study, we have followed the phases defined by them. The phases include:

1. Familiarization – we familiarized ourselves with the data through multiple readings.
2. Coding – We identified patterns that can be grouped in similar data segments. The data was coded in an excel sheet. The responses that were similar to each other were grouped together.
3. Searching for themes – we clustered the codes together by mapping the key patterns. The patterns that emerged from each cluster of codes were categorized as themes.
4. Reviewing themes – we checked whether the themes are a good fit with the coded data. We had multiple meetings to ensure that the codes extracted from the data were placed in the appropriate theme.

5. Defining and naming themes – we chose suitable words to ensure conceptual clarity.
6. Writing the report – we drew analytical conclusions across themes. Findings reveal that all participants, whether long-term or newly arrived immigrants, experience adjustment difficulties of one sort or another with respect to integration.

### **3. Findings**

Overall, most of the responses were directed toward the negative situations that immigrants face, but there were a few positive aspects too. The analysis of the open-ended questions identified four main themes. (1) language barrier, (2) discrimination in employment opportunities, (3) racism and inequality, and (4) fewer opportunities for integration. These themes are discussed in detail under separate headings. In such qualitative analysis, there are some aspects of the themes that might overlap, and the responses fall under two or more themes simultaneously (Gleibs, Sonnenberg & Haslam, 2014).

#### **3.1. Language barrier**

One of the main themes that emerged from the data is the language barrier. The Finnish language is one of the official languages of Finland, and 93 % of the population speaks the Finnish language (Sulkala & Karjalainen, 1992). The majority of the respondents did not elaborate on language as a barrier in a specific context but just mentioned it as a “linguistic barrier”, “speak Finnish”, “language barrier”, “Finnish language”, “language”, etc. Hence, the respondent did convey the idea that language is a point of concern, and they felt that not knowing the language caused them difficulties. Immigrants also expressed their concerns related to the language barrier as “The Finnish language is difficult to learn, and if you work in Finland, you have to learn it”.

Language itself being the prime concern, there are specific areas where language becomes crucial. For example, as per one of the respondents, “adaptation is difficult because of the language”. This means that the adaptation process in Finnish society is not easy since, for the adaptation process to be functional, language must play a vital role. Another respondent also pointed toward the same problem when he said that “language is the biggest barrier in cultural adaptation”. The respondent, in his response, compared the situation in the USA and Finland and concluded that whatever the scenarios are, the language barrier stays vital. In addition, immigrants think that they miss out on a lot of opportunities related to employment because of language. This also relates to the theme of discrimination, specifically at the workplace. Since there are a few responses that fall under multiple categories, the above-mentioned response not only points towards language as a reason for missing out on opportunities in general but on specified employment opportunities where a preference is given to Finnish-speaking individuals.

#### **3.2. Discrimination in employment opportunities**

Being outsiders, immigrants felt discriminated assessing to fair employment opportunities. An overwhelming number of participants showed their concern for the matter at hand. The respondents showed their concerns that in Finland, there are “no appropriate work opportunities”, with the core problem being “prejudice and discrimination and acceptance”, said one of the respondents. They also feel that “it is almost impossible to get a job in your field of study”. It is further elaborated by another respondent that “if you are lucky enough to get a job where English is the main language of work, it will be unfortunate for you if a Finnish person applies for the same job”. Hence, individuals not only face the problem of finding work opportunities that are suitable for their qualifications and field of expertise, but they also face prejudice and discrimination when it comes to being in competition with a more established local.

Since immigrants are unable to find suitable employment opportunities, they are “reduced to cleaning jobs even with a higher qualification”, said one of the respondents. The respondents said that the Finnish employment office “tries to push you into the two fields they have openings in, nursing and cleaning.” The respondents feel that the criteria upon which the jobs are offered is only at the surface level and totally at the discretion of the employer, who is Finnish.

One of the respondents said that it is a challenge for immigrants to get a job that matches their qualifications. They think that no matter what your education and skills are, the possibility of finding a suitable job is almost impossible. They also think that if they are lucky enough to find a job, progressing in the field becomes the next challenge. Immigrants in Finland feel unwelcome in offering their expertise in employment opportunities. Neither their qualification holds any value, nor do their skills. Prejudice and discrimination toward immigrants in the job market have been widely discussed stance as per the data. Some responses fall under two themes where they face prejudice in employment opportunities and also face racism and discrimination on the basis of their colour.

#### **3.3. Racism and inequality**

“No matter how HARD you work...how much education you have, how brilliant your ideas can be, they just don't matter! Your voice is hardly recognized”, elaborates one of the respondents. The extract emphasizes the perceived

level of discrimination and inequality that immigrants face when it comes to job opportunities. A small number of respondents have used words like “unequal”, “discrimination”, and “equality” to convey their feeling of being treated unequally. They feel that they are treated as lower than the Finns. The responses that fall under discrimination have encapsulated the feeling of hurt when the level of proficiency and education seems to be not sufficient. One respondent stated, “being considered as a 2nd class resident, even by the authorities. It’s no secret, and I have experienced different treatment in work recruitment and in housing rental applications.”

The prevalent theme describes how individuals feel that they are the victims of racism, whether at the workplace or at a general level. According to Lambert and Chasteen (1997), conservative individuals of the host society tend to display negative attitudes towards immigrants.

The respondents invariably pointed out that they are discriminated against on the basis of their “colour” and “appearance”. One of the respondents said that “I am a black person, and in my case, I am judged by my colour and the issues of where I come from. Secondly, I am judged as an immigrant.”

### **3.4. Fewer opportunities of integration**

“Finns make immigrants feel unwelcome”, the concern expressed by a respondent who has the impression that Finns do not welcome immigrants, making it difficult for the immigrants to “integrate into the society”. Finnish nationals are regarded as “difficult” and “not so social” by the respondents. This theme particularly points out the issue where immigrants feel that they lack opportunities for integration as Finnish society is “conservative and closed”, stated one of the respondents. They also used the words “closed doors” to explain the perception that Finnish society is a closed-door society where immigrants are not welcome. Referring to Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997), researchers argued that “Finnish culture is closed, and it is characterized by a high degree of uniformity (Naif & Saad, 2017). However, other scholars illustrated how the concept of the “silent Finn” has emerged and how it endures, reproduced in both public and academic discourses while lacking empirical evidence (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015).

Having few opportunities for integration in the perceptions of respondents makes the process of adaptation and adjustment difficult. When people move to other countries, they may expect to be a part of their new society. Having few opportunities to feel a part of society may slow down their adaptation and integration process. In addition, employment and job opportunities hold vital importance when it comes to being a productive member of the host society. But if the immigrants do not get the opportunities to earn and serve, they feel resentment towards the host country. Also, immigrants face racism and discrimination on the basis of their colour and origin, which makes the adjustment process more difficult.

Besides these major themes derived from the data, there are a few responses that do not particularly fall under any theme but hold value in themselves. For example, the process of getting the residence permit initially or the renewal takes a very long time. It is a slow process where immigrants feel anxious as they feel stuck in the country, and they are unable to travel anywhere. Immigrants also feel a lack of “trust” and “neglect” from the Finnish authorities, making it difficult for them to fully understand the new environment.

Besides all these negative emotions faced by the respondents, there are responses that bring forward the positive elements of Finnish society as the host country. One of the respondents elaborated on how Finns try to make the conversation easier for immigrants by trying to speak in English and not sticking to the Finnish language. It is also fair to note that authors have a very positive perception of Finland, and most have come across diverse adaptation opportunities, but there is a need to restrain the voice of the authors from the participants of the study.

## **4. Discussion**

Immigration has been on the rise in Finland since the beginning of the 90s (Statistics Finland, 2019), and over the years, the country has become increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse. Integrating into a new society as an immigrant comes with its own challenges. This research study tries to unfold the challenges immigrants experience living in Finland. The findings of the study reveal four themes, (1) language barrier, (2) discrimination in employment opportunities, (3) racism and inequality, and (4) fewer opportunities of integration. The four themes discussed in the result section are not mutually exclusive. It is important to understand the challenges immigrants face in the process of integrating into Finnish society. This might provide valuable data for policy development and for the creation, amelioration, and delivery of services and programs that support the integration of immigrants into Finnish society. “While migrants contribute significantly to economic growth, they are often thought to be parasitic on the host society (Turner, 2007). New migrants are economically poor and exploited; hence the members of minority communities within the host society are typically perceived as the key issue (Turner, 2013).

The experiences of immigrants in Finland highlighted in this study are in line with several other studies, which showed that there are some prejudicial attitudes toward immigrants (e.g. Nshom & Croucher, 2017; Pitkänen & Kouki, 2010). According to Heikkilä and Peltonen (2002), one of the major challenges faced by immigrants living

in Finland is the prejudice that is prejudice from the authorities, employers and society at large. Other studies among Finnish employers have confirmed that immigrants do face labour market discrimination and that ethnicity plays an important role in securing employment in Finland (Ahmad, 2020; Larja, Warius, Sundbäck, Liebkind, Kandolin & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2012). The unemployment rate among immigrants is high. Out of the 124,396 working-aged immigrants in the Finnish workforce spread across the country by mid-2019, 23.7% (29,504) were unemployed. By this same time, the general unemployment rate for the Finnish economy was 6.2 %, according to Statistics Finland. These numbers indicate that the number of immigrants who want to work but are unable to do so is almost four times more than that of the general population (Foreigner.fi). Some of the impediments to the recruitment of immigrants into the labour market include the absence of language skills, lack of social networks, and the fact that Finnish employers devalue foreign work experience, just to name a few (Heilbrunna, Kushnirovich, & Zeltzer-Zubida, 2010). This is the case at the global level, too, where immigrant workers are forced to do jobs that are difficult and dirty (Schenker, 2008) and are physically demanding (Reid, Lenguerrand, Santos, Read, LaMontagne & Fritschi, 2014). Booth, Leigh and Varganova (2012) in their research also suggested that a foreign-sounding name may also decrease the chances for job seekers to be called for an interview. Larja et al. (2012) found in their study that job seekers with Russian-sounding names had to send twice as many applications as job seekers with Finnish-sounding names. In a recent study, Ahmad (2020) found that ethnicity played a significant role in securing employment opportunities in Finland. In addition, “employers preferred Finnish applicants over ethnic applicants; they preferred candidates with European names over non-European names” (p. 468). The experience of prejudice, discrimination, and racism is likely to hinder the successful integration of immigrants into Finnish society (Council of Europe, 2010; Kim, 2001, 2005). The feeling of discrimination and inequality by the respondents has been repeatedly mentioned in various capacities. Immigrants throughout feel that they have very little chances of advancement and opportunities of growth, which is in line with Roberts, Swanson & Murphy’s (2004) study. It also builds on the observation that, in most and perhaps all immigration societies, there appear to be groups that suffer ethnic and/or racial exclusion from mainstream groups (Portes & Zhou, 1993). This may also be linked to segmented assimilation, where the short-term occupational strategies of immigrants may trap them permanently in secondary labour markets with low-paying jobs (Ballarino & Panichella, 2013). According to Schneider, Crul and Praag (2014), one of the characteristics of segmented assimilation is upward mobility, where the aim of migration is to provide a better future to their children, and the short-term occupational strategies of immigrants leave them with few opportunities of upward social mobility.

Despite the gap between formal and informal human capital is reducing, the social networks of immigrants also play a substantial role. Upon arriving in the new country, the immigrants depend on their network of family, friends, or immigrants from the same ethnic group to find a job. This way, they are most likely to get similar jobs as held by those in their social network, which are generally lower ranks in the occupational stratification (Ballarino & Panichella, 2015). Thus, ethnically homogenous ties can diminish the opportunities for upward social mobility, providing employment in niches or ethnic enclaves that natives do not occupy (Portes, 1995). Some overlapping themes also have reference to this, especially while talking about racism and the job market. Where the workplace can be a setting for racial and ethnic discrimination (Kosny, Santos & Reid, 2017), immigrants have reported that the workplace is one of the most common places where they face discrimination (Dunn, Forrest, Babacan, Paradies & Pedersen, 2011). The immigrants who face racism are categorized as the “outgroup” or “them”, while the individuals from the host society put themselves in the “ingroup” or “us”. A study held in Denmark by Jensen, Weibel, and Vitus (2017), suggests that racism does exist and “the polarization of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is deeply rooted, and the questions of exclusion and inclusion are central” (p. 55).

This indicates that to improve the integration of immigrants into Finnish society, attention must be given to improving Finnish attitudes towards immigrants as well as the need to enhance two-way integration. In addition, more must be done to discourage discrimination in recruitment and at the workplace. This is because the economic and social incorporation of immigrants is considered one of the most important indicators of their successful integration into their new society (Ahmad, 2020).

Discrimination based on language and appearance is a shared emotion by immigrants not only in Finland but worldwide. Migration leads to linguistic diversity, and if it is left unchecked, it, in turn, leads to social discrimination and evokes a sense of segregation and ghettoization (Park & Wee, 2017). Transnationalism is a reality today and can relate to the migrants' language learning difficulty, which they frame as a ‘language barrier. Because, among many reasons, being transnational and keeping a very strong tie with one's own country of origin may result in difficulty of getting to learn the destination language and socialise in the first place. It also resonates even more, when immigrant communities choose to socialise in their ethnic groups in the destination country, which may offer some ease, but it may distance them from the larger population, lowering the chance of interaction and language practice. Transnationalism also relates to the participant's perception of ‘few integration opportunities, which might be again the case when one intentionally or not, ends up in the surrounding of ethnic community members which indeed limit



integration in one end. Therefore, while transnationalism could enhance immigrant communities in certain aspects, such as well-being and feeling of belonging to their ethnic group, it might hinder the destination country's language learning and participation. The study by Foner (2016) gives an insight into the racism in urban America, where black immigrants face prejudice and discrimination from the majority population. One of the studies conducted in North America confirms that immigrants are ignored and prejudiced because of their English language level, which is below the native speaker's level (Lee & Rice 2007; Gluszek & Dovidio 2010a). Srivastava, Goldberg, Manian and Potts (2018) contemplate that "language use is intrinsically related to the processes by which individuals fit, or fail to fit, into their social environments" (p. 1352). Even though language training is an important component of the Finnish integration policy and process, this study still shows that it remains a major impediment to the successful integration of voluntary immigrants into Finnish society. While learning the Finnish language is notoriously challenging (Roux, 2017), it is a tough language to learn and is one of the most difficult languages in the world (Jaworski, 1997). For example, in a previous study in Finland, Russian immigrants perceived the absence of language competence as one of the major impediments to employment, and almost 40% of them wished for more language training (Heikkilä & Peltonen, 2002). More innovative ways of learning or gaining Finnish language competence, e.g., teaching the language through Finnish songs project, initiated by the Finnish Intercultural Community (skyry.fi), 'each one teaches one project by the Finnish Universities and increasing the number of language cafes organized by other NGOs, could be explored and adopted. In addition, possibilities to extend the intensive language training freely offered by the municipalities to all types of immigrants (also the voluntary and long term) could be investigated. For example, a form of language training can be developed and offered to immigrants who are working and not just those who are unemployed. There is also a need for more opportunities for socialization between immigrants and Finns. God and Zhang (2019) also argue that one of the foremost communication barriers among cultures is the language barrier. Even though a lot of this is already happening in Finland, this study shows that there is a need for more. More innovative opportunities that promote intergroup contact and knowledge about each other's culture are highly needed. Employers should be encouraged to employ immigrants when they are qualified for the job. Various studies have shown that immigrants who do not have proficient local language skills do experience discrimination not only at the workplace but also at the community level (Lippi-Green, 2012). In addition, there should be mandatory training for employers in Finland on issues related to ethnic discrimination. In our opinion, these are some of the initiatives that may be useful based on the findings of this study. Proficiency in language after migrating "is a prerequisite for economic, political, social and cultural integration (Hou & Beiser, 2006). Therefore, immigrants living in Finland should also look for more opportunities and ways to improve their language and networking skills.

## 5. Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, the sample size was small. In addition, it did not represent all the different types of immigrants in Finland. Data were collected online through social media. For this reason, we advise that generalizations about the entire immigrant population should be made with care. However, we recommend that future research consider exploring this topic in a bigger and more representative sample of immigrants living in Finland. Another limitation of this study is the instrument that was used. This study utilized a qualitative survey, which does not provide an opportunity for the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification or elaboration. In addition, some participants may not be willing to write elaborately, which may affect the depth of responses obtained. In addition, it prioritizes those who are willing and competent in writing. We recommend that future research should consider utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observations to understand these phenomena from another perspective. This will provide an opportunity for a deeper understanding and explanation of some of the findings. In addition, researchers could explore how these perceived challenges affect immigrants' attitudes and feelings towards locals.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to the existing research on perceived challenges immigrants experience as they integrate into Finnish society. As Finland becomes more ethnically and culturally diverse and immigrants become an integral and important part of Finnish society, we believe our study helps us better understand interethnic relationships.

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