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THE MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE COMMUNITY AS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Finnish educational and working life environments have become multicultural over the past few decades. In this article, I will discuss multicultural workplaces as learning environments from the perspective of interpersonal interaction, as well as the challenges and possibilities that increasing multiculturalism creates in the everyday of workplace communities.

In this article I will consider concepts of cultural competence and intercultural competence. Cultural competence encompasses the idea of knowing a single culture well. In intercultural competence individual becomes able to detach from knowing a few cultural codes and shift to the kind of behavior required in intercultural interaction.

William Howell's and William B. Gudykunst's ideas of cultural competence as well as Milton Bennett's (1998) model of development of intercultural sensitivity suggests that cultural sensitivity is a gradual process of development. Theories mentioned above are directional when I discuss intercultural learning and intercultural competence through the working life experiences of three adult students of immigrant background, each studying a degree on social and health care in Finland. The interviewees have lived in Finland for more than five years, and they have accumulated extensive work experience in their countries of origin as well as in Finland. In terms of approach the study is a qualitative case study. Central research questions in this study is: How is intercultural competence constructed in the story told by the person of immigrant background? Is it possible to learn intercultural competence?

Key words: *intercultural competence, multiculturalism, multicultural working environment*

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МУЛЬТИКУЛЬТУРНОЕ РАБОЧЕЕ СООБЩЕСТВО КАК СРЕДА ПОЛУЧЕНИЯ НОВЫХ ЗНАНИЙ

В Финляндии образовательная и рабочая среды за несколько последних десятилетий стали мультикультурными. Я рассматриваю мультикультурные рабочие места с точки зрения получения новых знаний о межличностных отношениях, а также препятствий и возможностей, которые возрастающий мультикультурализм создает в повседневной рабочей жизни.

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В данной статье я обсуждаю понятия «культурная компетентность» и «межкультурная компетентность». Культурная компетентность содержит идею о хорошем знании одной культуры. Обладая межкультурной компетентностью, индивиды могут абстрагироваться от знаний нескольких культурных кодов и перейти на уровень поведения, который требуется в межкультурном взаимодействии.

Согласно идеям о культурной компетентности таких авторов, как Уильям Ховелл и Уильям Гудикунст, а также модели интеркультурной сенситивности, которую разработал М. Беннет (1998), развитие межкультурной сенситивности представляет собой постепенный процесс. Эти теории используются, когда я рассматриваю межкультурное развитие и компетентность, приобретаемые через опыт рабочей жизни тремя взрослыми мигрантами, получающими образование в области социальной работы и здравоохранения. Адресанты живут в Финляндии более пяти лет и обладают широким рабочим опытом как в своей стране, так и в Финляндии. Исследование качественное, использована методология «кейс-стади». Главный исследовательский вопрос: Каким образом межкультурная компетентность конструируется человеком, у которого есть опыт миграции? Возможно ли научиться межкультурной компетентности?

Ключевые слова: *интеркультурная компетенция, мультикультурализм, мультикультурное рабочее сообщество*

Preface

In this article, I will discuss multicultural workplaces as learning environments from the perspective of interpersonal interaction, as well as the challenges and possibilities that increasing multiculturality creates in the everyday lives of workplace communities.

Finnish educational and working life organizations have become increasingly multicultural over the past few decades. Globalization has made the necessity to have international competence a part of every Finn's everyday reality. On a daily basis, in public and private arenas alike, we encounter people who represent cultures and societies other than the Finnish. However, encountering differences or, for example, participating in situations involving international communication, do not in themselves promote intercultural learning. Although multiculturality and world-wide international contacts at best create opportunities for joint learning, as well as for well-functioning cooperation and coexistence, they can result in misunderstandings, problems and, at worst, different levels of conflict (Salo-Lee 2009: 65).

A core concept of the social sciences applied in this article is integration to the Finnish society. A central element of Finnish multiculturality and integration policy is supporting immigrants to integrate into society through work and education. The discourse often centres around the ideas of participation in working life or citizenship of the job market (e.g. Katisko 2011: 31; Linnanmäki-Koskela 2010: 15). The high significance of the job market is not an exclusively Finnish characteristic in terms of integration policy, but something apparent in many international contexts. Seppo Paananen (2005: 178–179) notes that in the Nordic countries the aim has been to integrate immigrants from the beginning through the job market, for reasons connected to ideology and views on social morality.

Multiculturality, as a concept, means something associated with several cultures or containing characteristics from several cultures. The concept is used in at least three ways: as a synonym for cultural diversity, or to denote something associated with either political

work connected to cultural diversity or an overall political agenda connected to managing cultural diversity. In this article, I will consider culture and multiculturalism from the perspective of everyday life and as an interpersonal interactive relationship.

In the course of history, the concept of culture has taken on many forms. In the light of modern knowledge, cultures do not consist of a single culture but many, along with several cultural models. Cultures have mingled with each other as a result of global population movements and factors such as the development of data transfer technology. Similarly, nations are not localized, clear-cut or internally homogenous. Cultures do not rely on classification of various cultural characteristics or, for example, divisions between different ethnic groups, but rather consist of networks that people inhabit and generate through their action. (Hall 2003: 85–86.)

An individual as a member of a culture is not separate from the surrounding community or society. Culture shapes people, and people shape culture. We are constantly surrounded by our culture and cultures, and our relationship to our own and other cultures is constructed in this complex interaction.

The concepts of cultural competence and intercultural competence

Culture is manifested in meanings and codes that we give to things, objects and phenomena. We can talk about culturally determined knowledge, which means producing knowledge through interaction between individuals. For example, dividing people into categories on the basis of ethnic background, race, sex or other characteristics is based on socially constructed definitions of differences and criteria for categorization. Having culturally and historically defined knowledge means that understanding something is connected to where and when the people in question live, as well as what kinds of experiences people have in a particular society (Burr 1995). Thus, experiences like interacting with the welfare service system or participating in working life take on different forms, depending on their cultural and societal context.

Knowledge and social action are linked to each other in everyday interaction. Knowledge guides people to act in a certain way, but people also have numerous alternative ways of understanding the world. We can also talk about a kind of social knowledge repository which grows, develops, accumulates and is passed on through social interaction.

The form and content of skills, know-how and competence required in working life are in constant flux. The demand for expertise created by internationality and globalization concerns, among other things, language skills, cultural competence, tolerance, ethical principles and adaptability. Kaarina Mönkkönen (2007) emphasizes the ability to apply goal-oriented and cooperative knowledge in practical work, as well as context dependent and dialogue based competence.

Competence can be defined as capital that is generated through the process of succeeding in interaction. Competence can be strengthened through education and job guidance, but above all it is created in social and intrapersonal processes associated with work, leadership and the workplace community (Wallin 2013: 60). It is important to build training on the basis of strengthening the kind of competence that provides the student or the worker with an opportunity to utilize their experience in a genuine and relevant learning environment, thus developing the professional capabilities that are needed in working life.

As a concept, *cultural competence* is narrower than intercultural competence. Cultural competence encompasses the idea of knowing a *single culture* to sufficiently well to be able to act in an optimal manner within that cultural sphere. In *intercultural competence*, cultural

competence expands and the individual becomes able to detach from knowing a *few cultural* codes and to shift to the kind of behaviour required in intercultural interaction. In this article, I will use the concept of intercultural competence. (Salo-Lee 2005: 139).

Intercultural competence involves the idea of intercultural processes. Thus, it is not only about changing one's behaviour to match another culture, but an ability to adapt to different situations in the best possible way. This concerns interactions involving individuals from any culture. Intercultural competence means ability to communicate with people from another culture in a way that wins their trust and respect. Further, it means that the individual is able to adjust on a personal level to acting and working comfortably in a foreign cultural environment (Salo-Lee 2005: 139).

Intercultural competence and communication require knowledge of one's own cultural background, general cross-cultural knowledge, and culture-specific knowledge, i.e. knowledge concerning a certain specific culture (Lustig et al. 2006: 64–70). Awareness of one's own cultural identity may develop only as an individual moves outside the sphere of their own culture. Understanding one's cultural background means awareness of values, patterns of thinking, beliefs, norms and rules associated with the local culture.

Cultural competence can be defined as a process in which the individual learns and adjusts their behaviour, independently of the particular culture involved. William Howell (1982) has developed a theory that can be used to analyse the individual development of cultural competence.

Table 1

Awareness and the development of competence (Howell 1982)

	competence: no	competence: yes
awareness: yes	aware, no competence	aware, competent
awareness: no	no awareness, no competence	competent, no awareness

William Howell's (1982) and William. B Gudykunst's (1991) theories involve the idea of cultural competence developing through a gradual process. On the first level, a lack of clarity due to lack of awareness is dominant, which means that the person does not become aware of culturally determined characteristics in their own or the other's behaviour, and thus often ends up in situations where one or the other party feels misunderstood or insulted. The second level is awareness and incompetence (non-competence), where misinterpretations still happen, but the person is aware of the limitations of their understanding. The third level is awareness and competence, where the person is able to consciously modify their behaviour when dealing with someone representing a different culture. At the fourth stage, unconscious competence allows the person to act without consciously altering their actions, as the culturally appropriate way of communicating has become an integral part of their behaviour.

Conscious competence is learned intercultural competence which allows the individual to adjust their behaviour in the necessary manner, regardless of the specific culture involved. Unconscious competence means an ability to adjust to any situation without being aware of this process, by modifying one's behaviour as the situation requires (Salo-Lee 2006). This is a difficult stage to attain — some people have this kind of ability naturally. They can be considered to have inherent cultural sensitivity.

Intercultural competence cannot be discussed without considering its language-related aspect. However, researchers put different levels of emphasis on the significance of language skills. Some feel that good language skill is the basis for acquiring cultural competence. Some feel that language skill is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for cultural competence.

Milton Bennett's (1998) model of the *development of intercultural sensitivity* suggests that cultural sensitivity is a *gradual process of development*, taking place over several years. Being ethnocentric shows at the beginning of the development process in attitudes such as rejection or belittling of differences. Bennett calls the next stage enlightened ethnocentricity, where people apply the values and norms of their own culture in assessing others. Later, in so-called ethnorelativistic stages — acceptance, adaptation and integration — the approach reflects awareness, respect and competence. Attitudes towards the person's own culture and the foreign culture are balanced (Bennett 1998).

The significance of the concept of intercultural competence is easy to understand through *cultural sensitivity*. It is possible for a person to develop their cultural sensitivity, which means developing the ability to detect culturally based patterns in people's behaviour and thus understand the cultural meanings behind certain models of behaviour. Cultural sensitivity is an excellent quality in a person who repeatedly faces interaction with people from other cultures (Bennett 2008).

When a person learns the behavioural patterns of a particular culture, meaning they can adjust their behaviour to the customs of that culture, we can talk about a *culturally competent* individual. Intercultural competence is always based on interactive situations. In an interactive situation there are always two or more individuals involved, who never represent a single culture in a pure form, and rarely represent all the characteristic features of a single culture simultaneously. Therefore, systematically following the behavioural models of a single culture rarely leads to profound cultural competence.

The research questions and research data

In this article, I will discuss interpersonal and intercultural learning with the aid of both theoretical concepts and empirical research data. As theoretical framework, I have used William Howell's (1982) theory of interaction, Milton Bennett's (1993) theory of learning cultural sensitivity, and William B Gudykunst's (1991) theory of cultural competence. I will not go through theories above mentioned inclusively, rather theories are directional to approach intercultural competence and learning processes in working place environment. The research data analysis is grounded in the data.

I will discuss intercultural learning and intercultural competence through the working life experiences of three adult students of immigrant background, each studying a basic degree in social and health care and working on permanent contract in Finland. For the interview material, I use the term working life story. The data is part of the material I used in the research for my doctoral thesis.

The interviewees have lived in Finland for more than five years, and they have accumulated extensive work experience in their countries of origin as well as in Finland. In terms of approach, the study is a qualitative case study. The focus of the interviews has been on the interviewees' working life experiences both in their country of origin and in Finland. The data concerns learning in the context of work only, not learning at the educational institution.

Central research questions:

- How is intercultural competence constructed in the story told by the person of immigrant background?
- How is it possible to learn intercultural competence?

Stories of working life

Aisha: Realization that supports awareness of the significance of team work

Aisha's country of origin is in Africa. At the time of the interview, she has lived in Finland for about five years. She has completed elementary school in her country of origin and worked in various roles in tourism and catering. In Finland, she has worked in assistive positions at a library and in social and health care. I have interviewed Aisha twice.

In Aisha's stories of working life, the parts that emerged as the most prominent were the ones where she described the power structures of the workplace communities, about working in a hospital in Finland, and about the different styles of interaction within workplace communities in Finland and her country of origin. She does not stop at recounting her employment history, but rather gives an assessment of the work experience she has acquired in Finland, along with the events and phenomena associated with it, from her own cultural perspective.

The storytelling includes comparisons between Finland and Aisha's country of origin. She had worked at a day care centre around Christmas, and she describes traditions associated with Finnish Christmas celebration that were new and interesting to her. She talks about working with children and how children in Finland learn things through play. She also refers to differences between the societies of her country of origin and Finland in terms of social security systems and school systems. Below, I present two excerpts from Aisha's stories of working life, *illustrating gradual development of intercultural competence and awareness*. The topic of the discussion was power relationships and interaction in workplace communities in the country of origin and in Finland.

Marja: Is there anything else that comes to mind about your work at the day care centre (in Finland), about the children, the workers, the children's parents, what it was like to work there (at the day care centre)?

Aisha: For example, some colleague, if she had an appointment with a doctor, another (colleague) would let her go there (to the clinic). They (colleagues) discussed it together and then one was able to go...

Marja: What did people do in that kind of situation in your country, then?

Aisha: Things were different there. The boss decides, workers don't speak freely, because the worker is afraid that they will be treated badly if they disagree about anything. There are no clear discussions between boss and worker, for example if you disagree with the boss, you don't discuss that with your supervisor. The boss just wants to fire you, or will punish you directly or indirectly. The boss has that option in our country, no one tells them...

... In Finland I have courage to do more. They (Finnish colleagues) take it seriously if I say something. There (in the country of origin), even if you know something better than someone else, you know that you can't say it, because you have no power or position. You have to be quiet, you keep it to yourself. I didn't dare say things in Finland right away, I thought and checked several times. I thought that they (Finnish workers) know how to do things better, but then I found the courage to start saying what I thought, and one of my Finnish colleagues said: hey you really are right. Your own country probably does have an effect, although I know I'm right, I'm still not bold, I have to think a lot, do I dare to say it, am I right or wrong, do I dare to say...

In the last section of the data excerpt Aisha recounts how she noticed a concrete example of mismanagement that hampered everyone's daily work routines. However, she did not have the courage to bring the matter up for discussion, because she felt the other workers knew better. Aisha describes how she checked several times that the problem was

real before she brought it up at a team meeting. She was aware that her fears and suspicions were based on habits and sets of values related to the hierarchical structure of a workplace community, learned in her country of origin. They appeared to be part of a script that determined Aisha's way of being a member in a workplace community.

A crucial factor in the growth of awareness was a Finnish colleague whose encouragement and friendly words became pivotal for Aisha. She appraises her earlier working life experiences in her country of origin by stating that in Finland she has courage to do more because Finnish colleagues take her *seriously* and listen to what she has to say. In Aisha's story, it is possible to see a *clear connection between competence and interaction*. As Howell (1982: 56) and William Gudykunst's (1991) demonstrate there is a gradual process in learning the cultural competence. For Aisha learning process started from the very small occurrence at work. She started to be aware of her culturally determined characteristics in her own and other's behaviour.

In order to happen at the individual level, the development of competence requires, above all, *social processes within the workplace community as well as personal, internal processes*. Thus, students should be allowed to experience learning situations in real-life learning environments. This means that attention should be given to careful planning and organizing of on-the-job learning periods in cooperation with representatives of working life.

Zahra: Awareness of personal ethical and moral values becomes the basis for practice

Zahra has studied in her country of origin, which is situated in the Middle East, at the natural science faculty of a university. She was forced to interrupt her studies because of the political and religious issues in her country. In her own words, she "tried many occupations" before leaving her home country. She worked as a dressmaker and studied information technology. The longest period of work experience in her country of origin was work at a day care centre. At the time of the interview, Zahra has lived in Finland for about nine years, and she has worked as a temporary worker at day care centres, as care assistant in hospitals and in sheltered housing for the elderly, and as a home service worker. I have interviewed Zahra on three occasions.

From the start, Zahra's story is dominated by an analysis of values, as well as interactions and encounters between people. She does not limit her story to descriptions of working life experiences, but wants to share her experiences of other areas of life in Finland, as well. She recounts an interaction with a Finnish neighbour. When the neighbour had come down with a cold, Zahra went to ask if they needed help. The situation was an encounter between neighbours whose cultural scripts, or ways of acting, were different. The neighbour refused help, explaining they would be fine on their own. Despite the neighbour's resistance, Zahra decided to provide some soup and bread. The neighbour was pleased with the help and attention, but had noted that they were not used to receiving that kind of help from a neighbour. Zahra comments in her story that the neighbour did not know that this was a perfectly normal reaction on her part. In her country, a neighbour is in the same position with a family member or relative.

Helping the neighbour is something I interpret as a kind of perspective Zahra has on the world, the value basis through which she interprets the surrounding world and interactions between people. The sections of her working life stories contain knowledge that is part of cultural competence. This knowledge she uses to structure events and the people and interactive relationships involved in them. In the background of Zahra's story, it is possible to see an "ideal" of being a mother and a neighbour, and on the other hand a care

professional, based on a certain set of values and view of humanity. She describes her work at the hospital on the same basis as the incident with the neighbour. Zahra talks in a beautiful, almost poetic manner about care work where interaction can happen through channels of interaction other than speech: gaze, showing appreciation, touch, listening. Zahra's account lends support to Bennett's (1993) view on language skill being necessary but not sufficient in the theory of learning cultural sensitivity.

Nevertheless, Zahra's story does illustrate that the significance of language skill in a Finnish hospital organization is often in a more central role. In the following excerpt, the topic of the conversation was the significance of language skill and emotions in health care work.

Zahra: I understood them (Finnish colleagues) well, but they did not always understand me. I have a soft voice, often they (Finnish colleagues) reminded me that I have to talk louder to the patients, that otherwise they (the clients) won't hear me. I have to practise, although the patients did actually hear me...

Zahra is making an attempt to resist the idea that elderly clients should be addressed in a loud voice. She defends against criticism aimed at her language skills by bringing up her habit of speaking "softly". She understood what the Finnish nurses said, but the understanding was not mutual. It is interesting that the Finnish nurses did not criticize Zahra's language skill, but only expressed the wish that she should talk more loudly to the clients. However, this conflicted with Zahra's view that other kinds of interaction besides speech, for example listening, are important in client work. Zahra's experience lends support to the notion that the crucial thing in intercultural communication is not what you say, but the way the things you say are heard.

There are many parts in Zahra's story of working life where she talks about the closeness of contact with people and about emotions in the caring professions. She does not actually compare or criticize the care work carried out in Finnish hospitals, but the following excerpt expresses her cultural competence and awareness. Zahra talks about a patient's death.

Zahra: in our culture we show more feelings, that is self-evident to me. When that woman (patient) died, I actually cried, she (patient) was all alone, there was no one, no one close to her, perhaps she wouldn't have wanted to be alone, perhaps she would have liked to be at home, hearing the voices of her family members. But she was there at the hospital, and no one knows what she felt...

As intercultural competition and intercultural communication require knowledge of one's own cultural background, for Zahra this process meant very strong awareness of her own values, patters of thinking, beliefs, norms and roles associated with the Finnish culture. Zahras' story also reflect the process of immigration: when person comes to the new country, she/ he don't just bring the work force, but also her/his background, values and the personal history.

Rami: Trust cannot be won

At the time of the interview, Rami has lived in Finland for 15 years. He moved to Finland from his country of origin, which is in Asia, when he was quite young. He has completed elementary school in his country of origin and worked as a substitute teacher at a private school. For the entire time that he has lived in Finland he has worked in various tasks: cleaner, waiter, and had numerous short-term and temporary periods of employment in social and health care. I have interviewed Rami on two occasions.

Rami's story of working life contains many personal experiences of distrust between workers of immigrant background and the so-called native population. For example, when

working as a cleaner at a store, he describes how cleaners of immigrant background were subjected to checks by the store guards at the end of each shift. According to Rami, Finnish cleaners were not checked for possible shoplifting. In his account, it is possible to detect the existence of a certain kind of “immigrant category” in the workplace community, also when he worked at a hospital ward. Becoming the target for marginalization through this categorization shows as a feeling of having the employee’s work monitored and their basic vocational skills doubted (see also Nieminen 2010: 155). The following is a brief excerpt of Rami’s story of working life, from a section where the topic of the discussion was winning trust in a Finnish workplace community.

Rami: But it’s a really long process before you gain any trust. They (Finns) aren’t able to trust you because you’re foreign, that shows. Same in a patient-carer relationship, it takes a long time to build that relationship. It depends on the person, of course. But certain people have an attitude towards foreigners, that’s difficult to change, no matter how hard you try. For example, if a foreign guy comes to the ward, the Finns will rather work alone than as a pair with the foreigner.

Marja: Do foreign workers complain about this treatment to anyone...

Rami: The foreigners won’t talk, probably talk to each other, at some point someone might give feedback to recruitment and to the ward, but where does that feedback disappear then, I don’t know. Sometimes we talk at some ward meeting but then it’s over and done with. And if, for example, some property has gone missing from a patient, you (the foreigner) are always the prime suspect in it, no matter how nice and reliable you are. And, for example, when medication is dispensed, Finnish nurses always check that you got it right. And still you’re the one who’s responsible for it and you try to do your job right. And then when family members come to visit the ward, and I could talk to them too, but there’s always some Finn between me and them...

Rami constructs his experiences of employment in such a way that the story paints a picture of incomplete participation by the employee of immigrant background in the daily life of the workplace community. The incomplete participation is a result of the actions and interactions of the employees of Finnish background. Rami also talks a lot about how interaction between workplace community members was closer in his country of origin, and how colleagues could even become personal friends outside the workplace.

Despite his long history of work experience (about 15 years) in Finland, his excellent Finnish skills and his Finnish citizenship, Rami expresses that he has not been able to attain the kind of interactive relationship he has hoped for in Finnish workplace communities. He often interprets and observes things and events in a Finnish workplace community from the perspective of his own culture. But he didn’t do the decision to ‘read’ social functions from the Asia-perspective himself, he was forced to do it by the social interaction in the work community. Competence can be defined as a capital that is generated through the process of *succeeding in interaction*. Interaction and joint learning should be based in dialogue.

Thus it appears that mastering the language is not a sufficient part of the so-called cultural literacy. Salo-Lee (2009: 66) writes about cultural capital, which is needed to attain cultural literacy. With the help of this literacy, a person of immigrant background learns to understand the local way of thinking — the mental landscape — and is able to act both sensitively and effectively in their new environment.

However, Liisa Salo-Lee (2009: 66) emphasizes that cultural literacy is necessary for the people representing the host country as well, as intercultural adjustment is a mutual process. Cultural literacy, awareness and understanding of the meanings used by oneself and others, develops through interaction.

Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed a multicultural workplace community as a learning environment. When a workplace community becomes increasingly multicultural, what kind of journey does this open for the members of that community? The aim of this article has been to illustrate the diversity of multicultural everyday life through small autobiographical stories. Internationality is present in people's interactive relationships, reciprocity and trust. Each one of us can observe culturally determined patterns in our own and others' behaviour.

The development and learning of intercultural competence is generated through a process of succeeding in interaction. Intercultural competence does not arise through personal, intra-personal processes only, but closely involves a social community such as educational institution or workplace community.

Developing intercultural competence cannot be accomplished by seeking out international communication situations only or, for example, by participating in international student or teacher exchange programmes. Globalization is already present at the local level in Finnish educational institutions and workplace communities. When the ethnic backgrounds of students, teachers and workplace community members, representing both so-called native and immigrant backgrounds, are considered as opportunities and action strategies, the angle of observation shifts to a wider context. Different cultural customs, conceptions and knowledge concerning work, interactive relationships, working methods and roles in the workplace should be brought into shared discourse in educational institutions and workplace communities.

In workplace communities representing the social- and health sectors, the daily interactions between workers, as well as between workers and clients, is close and intensive. When the workplace community members and clients represent cultures and languages from different backgrounds, it is crucially important to be able to communicate with people from other cultures in a way that wins their trust and respect. Also, it is important that the individual is able to feel comfortable about being and working in a different cultural environment.

In all the stories of working life presented in this article, interaction between workplace community members is crucially important. From the perspective of developing intercultural competence, understanding one's own cultural background is in a central role. Of the interviewees, Zahra has clearly consciously acquired and recognised the norms and values concerning interaction with elderly clients associated with her own culture. Her working life story conveys the impression that acting according to her own values is not always easy in a workplace community. However, Zahra does not abandon her own cultural knowledge. It is important to bring Zahra's cultural knowledge of high ethical standards in handling social and health care clients to the entire workplace community as something everyone can utilize, and as something that will benefit the clients. This would be an example of true utilization of intercultural competence.

One of the basic needs involved in human life is being recognized in a community and having one's existence and actions accepted. Being a full member in a workplace community involves being heard and respected. This is a matter of reciprocity and interaction. It is important that employees representing both immigrant backgrounds and the so-called native population recognise their own cultural models and *scripts* concerning ways to act in working life. Workplace communities consist of social interaction, and part of their everyday practices should be the exchange, sharing and utilization of cultural knowledge. The right to also disagree and to question the prevailing cultural models in working life is the starting point for equality in working life and education.

The individuals of immigrant background I interviewed have brought a piece of the globalized world to their new home country as they moved to Finland. Legislation regulates and various information packages guide the person arriving in the country regarding the service system and applying for jobs and training. However, the main part of concrete, everyday integration takes place at perfectly ordinary Finnish workplaces, educational institutions, day care centres and schools. In the course of everyday interactions and encounters, the basis for integration takes shape, as well as the sense of belonging and participation in the new country.

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