How Diversity Matters in Working Life: A Literature Review in a Finnish Context

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Abstract

Diversity in working life has numerous impacts, which are studied in different disciplines. This review article summarises the academic discussion of ethnic diversity in Finnish working life from three perspectives – of immigrant-background employees, their Finnish co-workers, and employers – intending to explore how cultural diversity matters and articulate its implications. This is achieved via a literature review with content analysis. In the corpus, diversity per se is not defined; instead, it is connected with issues of inclusion, cultural distances, or discrimination in the workplace. To find significant gaps in the up-to-date literature, the authors approach immigrants without any particular definition, despite the fact that migrants comprise such a diverse and heterogeneous group. In addition, the analysis revealed that interaction and relations with co-workers need further study. The primary outcomes identified that the employer perspective in the context of structural and societal interpretation is largely absent from Finnish research. Also, further research is needed on how the second generation of immigrants negotiates their transition from education to employment and on trust relations between minority groups in the Finnish labour market.

Keywords: *Diversity, working life, immigrants, employee, employer.*

Introduction

In Finland, the share of immigrants born abroad is currently 8.5% of its 5.5 million population (Statistics Finland, 2021). The ageing of the population in Finland has increased the need for skilled labour, which is evidenced by the lack of workers in various professions in the public and private sectors. Due to this demographic trend, Finnish immigration policy has been stressing a call for work-based immigration (Valtioneuvosto, 2021).

Relative to other categories of immigration, the amount of work-based immigration has risen in Finland in recent years (Finnish Immigration Service, 2022). This is manifested as the increasing heterogeneity of ethnic backgrounds within Finland's labour force, and it means that diversity will emerge in workplaces. Simultaneously, equality and fair rules in the labour market face a challenge. Although anti-discrimination regulations and equal-employment policies are emphasised, structural obstacles and inequalities are experienced

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in everyday work (Ahmad, 2020; Lehtovaara and Jyrkinen, 2021; Wrede, 2010). As the number of immigrant-background employees rises, various forms of exploitation may emerge (e.g., Ollus, 2016).

Diversity and equality are contextual concepts: their meanings and consequences are embedded in the socio-historical contexts in which they are used (Louvrier and Tuori, 2014). Here, we explore this weave by examining three threads in academic discussion about diversity in working life in Finland: the perspectives of immigrant-background employees, their Finnish co-workers, and employers. More specifically, we are interested in illustrating what is actually changing, or how working life is challenged through the lenses of diversity.

This review article is a part of Mobile Futures, a multidisciplinary research project focused on making a scientific and societal contribution to co-creating an inclusive society.

The conceptual framework

In this review article, the analysis and discussion are organised loosely according to three distant entities, sense of belonging, employees and employers, that are studied in the Mobile Futures research project. Theoretical approaches that are used to study these entities relate to social identity (belonging), human capital (employees) and diversity management (employers) discussions. Here, these are also used to structure the literature review, and analysis of the scholarly state of art.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 2004) describes how people build their social identity by classifying themselves and others into social categories that are salient in a certain social context, such as gender and ethnicity groupings. In summary, individuals tend to perceive their own group favourably while those who are different – for any of several reasons, such as appearance or a 'foreign accent' – are categorised negatively. Consequently, immigrants could more easily become targets of bullying, as they 'provoke' negative attitudes in the majority group (see for instance, Bergbom et al., 2015).

The human capital theory (Becker, 1964) stresses the knowledge and characteristics that the employee can contribute to productivity. This employee-oriented approach addresses how human capabilities may play a crucial role in achieving economic results. A related argument is that the labour market treats all (potential) workers equally, based on their competencies (Syed, 2008). Its proponents posit that economic values are the crucial factor in a company's decision to hire immigrant-background employees.

Diversity management is widely applied in business management. Scholars in this field vary in their definitions of diversity management – several discourses overlap, forming several definitions and solutions, suited to a given time and place. Authors such as Cox and Blake (1991) and Özbilgin and Syed (2015) stress that differences in facets such as ethnicity hold the potential to contribute to an environment wherein workplace diversity serves the organisation's success. Expanding the notion of diversity management, Ely and Thomas (2001) showed that three distinct approaches can be distinguished: 'integration-and-learning' stresses the value of learning as a key idea in diversity management, 'access-and-legitimacy' emphasises adjusting employee characteristics to the diversity of customers in the market, and 'antidiscrimination-and-fairness' represents the idea that having diversity-rich personnel is an ethical tool to ensure justice and fair treatment of all members of the society.

Data and analysis

Reviewing the scholarly discussion of diversity in working life in a Finnish context, we have selected literature that reflects various disciplines – administration/management, social studies, gender studies, studies of employee relations, and others. While emphasising the Finnish context, the corpus included some global contextualisation also. We did not restrict our selection of sources to any particular definition of an immigrant due to the transitional and intersectional immigration purposes they might have. Therefore, focusing on the general level is intended to find also significant gaps in the research topic of diversity at the workplace. The analysis followed the principles of content analysis along with temporal and thematic categorisation.

We conducted two literature reviews in parallel, of material in English and in Finnish published in 2000–2022 comprising a scholarship of 176 articles on the diversity at the workplace topic. The timeframe was purposely chosen to be extensive due to the possibility of analysing the (un)developments of the topic, giving to the article a temporal notion to contrast previous and current practices. The primary search was for the following keywords via Google Scholar: diversity + inclusion + trust + working + life + immigrant + Finland. We supplemented this with a second search, for diverse + workplace + Finland + immigration; however, the change in keywords did not affect the results much: the results appeared to be about the same. Thinking about what kinds of articles might have fallen through this net, we performed a third search, with the keywords intercultural + well-being + Finland + work. Again, the results did not differ dramatically from the first set. Other references, found independently by the authors, complemented the corpus for a fuller picture.

Diversity in working life: Three perspectives

Below, we present review findings for each of the three selected aspects of diversity in working life: the perspective of the Finnish-background co-workers, the employers' views, and the experiences that the immigrant-background employees themselves have of working in Finland. Although presented in turn, these are intertwined and connected to each other.

Finnish co-workers' and the work community's stance

Various reports in Finnish deal with how immigrant-background workers have experienced relations with Finnish co-workers in working life. Jaakkola (2000) found that a fifth of immigrants had experienced fellow workers treating them unequally. The sense of inequality was manifested in attitudes, not talking with the immigrant, evasion, and staring. According to a FinMonik survey of those born abroad, the most commonplace forms of employment-linked discrimination involved attitudes of colleagues or supervisors, career-advancement opportunities, and salary-related issues. From self-reported levels of education, it would seem that more highly educated people with a foreign background experience discrimination in working life more often than others do (Kanninen et al., 2022).

Bergbom et al.'s (2015) research specific to Finnish transport companies showed that, while immigrants were, on average, more likely than natives to label themselves as bullied, the least culturally distant immigrants did not differ in this respect from natives. Relative to natives, the intermediate-distance group of immigrants faced nearly three times the risk of being bullied, and the risk was nearly eight times higher for the most culturally distant group.

For the well-being of the work community and individual, how a new employee with an immigrant background is welcomed into the work community and introduced to the duties is crucial. In research by Pehkonen (2007), Finnish work communities stressed that

even more attention should be paid to new-employee orientation. Further, orientation itself, especially for immigrants, may cause experiences of inequality in the work community. For this reason, supervisors do not particularly want to emphasise the orientation of immigrants, even though it may provide valuable detailed advice that native Finns do not need in the same way (Tuononen, 2013).

Research has concentrated also on challenges arising from diversity in working life. In Sippola's doctoral dissertation (2007), the most significant challenges emerging with the growth of diversity in Finland seemed to be the insufficiency of language and professional skills, the need for a flexible approach to cultural differences, differing conceptions of work, and differences in gender roles in working life. For instance, in supervisor-subordinate relations, it can prove problematic when a male employee of immigrant background finds it difficult to accept instructions from a female supervisor or co-worker. Many situations of this sort have been resolved through discussion, upon establishing that, in Finland, women hold management roles (Ekholm, 2008; Sippola, 2007; Toivanen et al., 2018; Lyytinen and Toom, 2019; Heikkilä et al., 2022).

From the point of view of supervisors in Tuononen's (2013) research, those immigrants with the weakest language skills create a bit of uncertainty in workplaces, but there is still optimism, confidence that those skills will improve. That said, some Finnish supervisors experienced more stress than others from not being sure the messages are understood. Also, supervisors reported fatigue that seems to be caused by taking care of subordinates.

The Finnish work sphere has brought mentorship into use to facilitate immigrants' smooth integration. In Lillia's (2000) framework, the tasks of a mentor fall under the roles of coach, guardian, support person, and contact person. The guardian is an active encourager and guide, possibly serving as a role model, while the support person role is designed to encourage and give chances. The contact person is an initiator and bridge-builder. Finally, the coach is an active questioner and a critical friend. Orienting and guiding an employee with an immigrant background is a lengthy process, and it requires a commitment to this task throughout, from orientation staff and supervisors alike. The key questions are how systematic the work community wants to make the process in question, how the instructor/mentor is selected from that community, and how mentors are trained for their task.

Pointing out another factor, Bergbom and Kinnunen (2014) concluded that interaction and positive social relations with immigrant co-workers may help host nationals acquire skills such as better cross-cultural communication, which assist them too in navigating and thriving in a culturally diverse workplace and, thereby, renders their work more satisfying. However, this issue needs further study.

In the episodes from immigrants' work biographies that Katisko (2011) analysed for her doctoral dissertation, there are repeated examples of immigrants either being talked about by others into a part of their work community or remaining silenced at its margins. Recognising and benefiting from the differences represented by both those with an immigrant background and members of the so-called native population increases the pool of social knowledge at the work-community level.

There are also some studies where the work community having immigrant background workers were evaluated by the employers. Sjöblom-Immala (2006) explored companies in Finland to find out what sorts of attitudes existed regarding immigrants. The majority of employers said that their employees with an immigrant background did not differ from their native employees. Some employers did not consider immigrant employees to be as good as Finnish workers, but some others thought that they were even better than Finnish employees. Those employers who consider them to be better mentioned that immigrants often had a stronger work ethic and they were more flexible compared to native employees, whereas employers who thought that immigrants were not as good as native-

born employees justified their views by mentioning a lack of language skills, education, professional skills and cultural knowledge.

According to Lyytinen and Toom's (2019) research, the Finnish employers had mostly positive experiences with their refugee and immigrant employees. They highlighted their employees' diligence, motivation, strong work ethic, commitment and cultural knowledge. Many employers also appreciated the cultural exchange and liveliness that their employees with an immigrant background brought to the workplace. Some employers expressed that having immigrant or refugee employees created a positive image of their company and simply brought value to the workplace. There existed a desire to promote diversity in their work community.

Employer perspectives on diversity and inclusion

The issue of employers' role connected with economic migration and globalisation in the Finnish context was raised in the early 2000s by Trux (2000), Forsander (2002), and Raunio (2002). Trux's ICT-company based study offered the most detailed treatment of practices and solutions for handling a diverse workforce, while Forsander linked the discussion more to globalisation and labour markets' structural context, and Raunio to regional development. Delving into the cultural competencies of individuals at high-tech firms, Trux introduced cultural bridge-builders with bi-cultural or tri-cultural backgrounds, who pour cultural knowledge into the organisation. Profound knowledge of several cultures enables a person to see things from several perspectives at once. Such people are characterised by multidimensional problem solving skills, flexible thinking, multi-professionality, and social skills (Trux, 2000: 306).

Several studies, reports, and practical handbooks from soon after that emphasise an even broader conception of cultural competence. Brewis's (2008) doctoral dissertation on intercultural competence and Sainola-Rodriguez's (2009) on transnational competencies supply both academic insight and empirical evidence of employers seeking to manage diversity-rich work communities. Importantly, the core of this competence was conceptualised as not a clear understanding of various nuances of specific cultures but the development of generic interaction skills and an understanding of mobility's impacts on individuals. Further, other work probing employers' cultural competencies examined many routine practices of organisations to adjust work to contexts of greater diversity (Korhonen and Puukari, 2013; Niemelä, 2019).

Although the corpus contained many reports related to practices and experiences in managing diversity of work communities from the employer perspective, employees' points of view often remained strong or even dominated in these too. For example, both the Journal of Finnish Studies special issue presenting various perspectives on global highly skilled migrants in Finland (Habti and Koikkalainen, 2014) and Habti and Elo's (2019) compilation focusing on 'self-initiated-expatriation' reproduce mostly employee/family perspectives rather than strictly employer viewpoints. Still, there is a strong and clear link to the management of diverse work communities and to broader migration discussions.

Of the migration field's reports and other literature, only a few pieces express a clear employer angle on the matter. Söderqvist's (2005) questionnaire-based study prioritised skills and personality over other qualities in employment, the report by Sippola et al. (2006) focuses on the development of diversifying work communities, and Sippola and Hammar-Suutari (2006: 15) showed that commitment to equality depends both on the organisation's and its members' perspectives to diversity and on their willingness and ability to change their activities. Finally, Raunio and Forsander (2009: 111, 134) noted that mutual integration within the work community is foundational to well-designed diversity management in globally operating multinational companies and reduces a typical 'break-room syndrome' wherein non-Finnish-speakers are readily excluded from informal social interaction.

While many studies have recognised the value of obtaining strong strategic level support, from the top management, for the implementation of influential diversity management related practices (e.g., Pitkänen et al., 2017), few have focused on diversity's benefits for the business itself in the Finnish context (Lahti, 2013).

Unlike in the migration-related studies, employers' perspective was strong in the management and organisation-related studies, which directly link cultural competence to management practices, especially in the context of international human resource management. These address specific topics such as short-term assignments (e.g., Tahvanainen et al., 2005) and expatriates' performance (e.g., Tahvanainen, 2000) that are relevant for employers and businesses. Management solutions and cultural competence involve such organisational practices as providing briefings by previous expatriates; written materials; and, when the assignee's family are moving to the new site, a preparatory visit. Pre-assignments visits are considered to be among the most effective ways of reducing uncertainty surrounding upcoming international assignments. Also, some companies have an in-house training centre for cross-cultural competencies etc. (Tahvanainen et al., 2005: 668).

For addressing diversity management directly, an especially relevant observation is that no exact definition for diversity management exists. The multiplicity of overlapping discourses has led to a variety of definitions and, especially, of solutions for a given time and place. Louvrier (2013) articulates the concept's flexible real-world application well by stating that diversity management should be interpreted not via 'essentialist views of difference' but as entailing the organisation not participating in the social construction of differences and related inequalities. Importantly, ethnic-minority employees seldom regard their differences as genuine resources for work. According to Louvrier, this finding may be connected with minority employees frequently being left to handle difference-related challenges on their own, irrespective of organisation-level promotion of diversity. However, international (human-resource) management literature does offer highly practicable artefacts for employer cultural competence toolkits. Analysing and improving these can inform better coping with diversity.

Two in-depth studies specific to Finland are Sippola and Leponiemi's work (2007: 120–121) listing diversity's benefits (innovativeness, improved customer service, etc.) and challenges (e.g., insufficient legal or professional language skills) and Sippola's (2007) development of a taxonomy for analysing diversity in human-resource management settings. Supplementing such work, international comparisons including Finnish companies prove insightful. For instance, Finnish companies less often promote diversity management (Point and Singh, 2003: 755), and Nordic managers associate it with business performance markedly less often than, for instance, UK ones do (Singh and Point, 2004).

In summary, while numerous studies have examined the competencies and practices required of employers for addressing a diversifying workforce and applying inclusive work-life practices, literature focusing on Finland may be considered rather sparse. An employer's perspective on structural and societal interpretations is particularly lacking.

Immigrant-background employees in Finnish working life

Research considering diversity specifically from the perspective of immigrant-background employees in Finnish working life elaborates on various issues, ranging from gender (in)equality and labour-market segregation (e.g., Lehtovaara and Jyrkinen, 2021; Sinitsyna et al., 2021), through cultural labels and cultural-identity processes in everyday workplace interactions (e.g., Habti, 2021; Lahti, 2013), to questions of language, especially work-related language skills, and nationality (e.g., Rynkänen, 2015; Suni, 2022). In addition, various professional fields, most prominently social and health care (e.g., Calenda et al., 2018; Näre, 2013) and education (Jokikokko, 2010), but also arts and culture domains (Lahtinen et al., 2020), examine matters connected with diversity.

However, neither body of literature defines diversity as such; instead, it gets linked to multiple phenomena of integration, inclusion, cultural distance (from the host culture), or discrimination. Intersectionality too is underlined, in research examining the work status of immigrants, from EU and non-EU countries (Mankki and Sippola, 2015).

One issue identified by Lehtovaara and Jyrkinen (2021) is that Finland's strong principles of equality and inclusion notwithstanding, highly educated migrant women face major difficulties in job-application processes. Though these women are more educated than their male counterparts and have stronger Finnish-language skills, they encounter many obstacles in employment. According to Sinitsyna et al. (2021), both industrial niching and workplace segregation are highly gendered. Given the gender stereotypes and gendered social responsibilities, females and males tend to become concentrated in different industries and workplaces (Heikkilä, 2021).

As for nationality and language, scholars highlight that, for example, migrants from Russia – or speaking Russian – are considered less visible and culturally more proximal to the Finnish population than other ethnic migrant groups. However, they experience discrimination on social, political, and historical grounds (Liebkind et al., 2016), with even highly skilled migrants in culturally diverse workplaces facing stigma because of their 'Russianness' when negotiating their cultural identity (Lahti, 2013). Another finding related to distances comes from Calenda et al. (2018). When researching foreign-born nurses in Finnish social- and health-care organisations, they discovered that integration is easier for Estonian nurses than those from other countries. The languages' general similarity and Estonia's geographical proximity to Finland support integration.

As for cultural labels, Näre (2013) found them evident in her article analysing the process of care work becoming glocalised in Finland, and how employers (mis)recognise migrants as potential workers. Migrancy has the potential to induce institutionalised patterns of cultural valuing that often assign the 'migrant' a status of inferiority, otherness, and difference, rather than a status of a peer, at par. The difference that foreign-born workers embody signifies the perception of them as a priori suspects who lack skills and qualifications.

Furthermore, scholars consider the effects of time and temporality when studying the phases in the labour cycle, from application and recruitment processes to experiences of ongoing work. Studies have scrutinised discrimination in the former concerning factors such as job applicants' names (e.g., Ahmad, 2020), and the results of a study by Lehtovaara (2021) attest that experiences of discrimination complicate and prolong the job-search process. Discrimination and racism were evident even before the search process began. On the other hand, there are studies examining how to promote equality and implement diversity-promoting recruitment methods (e.g., Rask et al., 2021).

Pinpointing a temporal effect of a different sort, Calenda et al.'s above-mentioned study found a distinction between 'well-established' and newly arrived professionals. This was manifested in the significantly lower-status positions held by nurses recruited internationally in more recent years. The difference was explained by the 'new' professionals having been hired mainly to resolve a personnel shortage, not for their qualifications. This factor exists alongside the national and professional background identified as key to the integration process related to foreign-background nurses' cultural diversity in Finland.

Neither 'assumed' culture nor personal identity is static. Addressing this facet of diversity in working life, Lahti (2013) characterised the predominant approach to researching culturally diverse workplaces' social interaction as having focused mainly on organisational efficiency and discrimination. She criticised it for treating cultural identity as static, monolithic, and universally shared. Understanding of workplaces' cultural diversity can be better enriched through incorporating interpretive and critical interpersonal communication. Here, cultural identity is seen as dynamic and processual,

constructed between and among people in everyday workplace interactions and in relation to larger social, political, and historical forces.

Discussion and conclusions

Diversity as a standalone concept has no single precise definition, because it extends over many dimensions. Depending on the context and perspective, the concept displays multiple facets. It is accompanied by questions of integration, inclusion/exclusion, linguistic and cultural impact, and various forms of discrimination and inequality in Finnish working life.

Based on our literature review, some scholars see immigrants' economic integration as an important pathway for their fuller inclusion in the host society. One's experiences of the inclusion and exclusion built into working life play an important role in the construction of active citizenship. Simultaneously, immigrants bring an element of global know-how to society, which, as it gets shaped by Finnish work communities, becomes integrated into those communities (Katisko, 2011; Trux, 2000). As for the benefits that increased diversity can generate, Sippola's (2007) case organisations sought improved customer service, greater recruitment potential, cultural competence, innovativeness, and a better workplace atmosphere. These features of the landscape tie in very much with the human capital theory.

The picture from the angle of social identity theory shows more of a challenge because some immigrants have experienced unequal treatment in Finnish working life, their professional opportunities are not similar to so-called natives (e.g., Bergbom et al., 2015). Though Finnish society rests strongly on principles of equality and inclusion, even highly educated migrant women face major difficulties with job application processes (Lehtovaara and Jyrkinen, 2021).

In the Finnish context, the literature seems to focus on topics related to employment equity opportunity (EEO) that approaches directly at under-represented minority ethnic groups (such as anti-discrimination or equal-opportunity) rather than topics that are typical to diversity management literature, including business benefits, the organisation's efficiency, and market performance (e.g. Wrench, 2005).

Finnish working life is starting to take diversity into account more and more as a competitive advantage, with good practices having already entered use in some fields of work. Mentoring is one example. It offers a win-win situation as two-way integration for immigrant-background employees, their co-workers, employers, and ultimately Finnish society. A sense of belonging in the various spheres of life – with working life being no exception – forms an important basis for deeper inclusion in the Finnish labour market and in Finland as a whole.

Nowadays Finnish discussion places emphasis on employees' point of view and on manifestations of individuals' rights and equality in work life. Yet, far less emphasis is given to the employer's perspective at regional or national level on how to disseminate diversity-management practices and cultural competencies widely in the labour market, beyond individual front-runner employers.

Finally, three important research gaps emerged from this literature review that could be filled in the future:

Firstly, in general, issues of interaction and positive social relations between immigrant-background employees and Finnish co-workers require further study (e.g., Bergbom and Kinnunen, 2014). Likewise, creating genuinely multicultural workplaces requires rethinking workplace skills and reflecting on the understanding of work processes, workplace roles, and ways of participating (e.g., Toivanen et al., 2018).

Secondly, from an employer perspective, it would be relevant to explore what social innovations and social mechanisms could increase capabilities to cope with diversity at regional, national, or industry levels, in pursuit of a societal impact.

Thirdly, there is a need for further study from the perspective of the second generation of immigrants: how they negotiate their transition from education to employment. Also, trust relations between minority groups in work life would require more research in a Finnish context.

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