Downward professional mobility, cultural difference and immigrant niches: Dynamics of and changes to migrants’ attitudes towards interpersonal communication and work performance

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Abstract
Immigrants’ labour market participation is a crucial indicator of their assimilation within the host societies. The workplace is a key site of intercultural transmission, where migrants receive opportunities to recognise, evaluate and prospectively adapt to the norms, values and standards of the new socio-cultural field. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with Poles working below their skill level in Norway, this article analyses two work-related areas where cultural difference is encountered: (1) interpersonal communication and (2) work performance and attitude. Migrants take jobs in niche economies, thereby working below their qualifications. Degradation limits their opportunities to encounter non-migrants and hinders them from recognising the cultural codes typical for the host community. A purely occasional contact with non-migrants leads to numerous cultural misunderstandings and cultural distrust in the long term. Those migrants who work outside of immigrant niches more easily comprehend cultural differences; as a result, they more effectively adapt in Norway. In the Bourdieu-inspired theoretical framework, I propose to recognise ‘moments of consciousness’ of the habitus as key moments in the reflexive adaptation process, offering a new perspective on habitus change as an element of adaptation to a new socio-cultural working environment.

Keywords
Cultural adaptation, cultural distrust, downward professional mobility, habitus change, immigrant niche

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Introduction

As migratory flows steadily increase and societies undergo ‘transition to diversity’ (Alba and Foner, 2014: 266; Antonsich, 2018), this transition abounds in processes related to experienced encounters with cultural differences, rendering these encounters a particularly interesting topic within the current debate on human mobility (Antonsich, 2018; Berg and Nowicka, 2019; Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014).

Immigrants continue to face obstacles to equal participation in host labour markets and other dimensions of social life (e.g. Salmonsson and Mella, 2013; Sert, 2016; Van Riemsdijk, 2013). Compared with non-migrants, immigrants more often suffer from underemployment, precarious positions and discrimination in host labour markets (e.g. Bendixsen, 2018; Friberg and Midtbøen, 2019; Midtbøen, 2015, 2019; Nowicka, 2018; Sert, 2016). These inequalities result in ethnic segmentation of labour markets and the emergence of immigrant niches (Bauder, 2006, 2008; Friberg and Midtbøen, 2017, 2019; Rath, 2002; Waldinger, 1994).

The emergence of research on immigrant niches has introduced an important strand of literature to the discourse on ethnic segmentation of the labour markets. Scholars have considered the influence of various factors like migrant networks (e.g. Massey et al., 1993; Tilly, 1990), labour market demand and employers’ preferences (Rath, 2002; Waldinger, 1994) in the formation of immigrant niches. In the Norwegian context, research on immigrant niches has paid particular attention to employers’ perspectives (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2017, 2019), showing that Norwegian employers ascribe certain stereotypes to particular national migrant groups. Both in the US and European contexts, studies on immigrant niches have been concerned with their formation – the reasons and processes that underlie their emergence. In this article, I would like to move the discussion towards the topic of migrants’ cultural adaptation by analysing how working in immigrant niches influences migrants’ adaptation to the new socio-cultural space. I use the term ‘immigrant niche’ to address certain workplaces that cluster immigrants within and across occupations and industries; for example, specified restaurant chains operate both restaurants that exclusively employ Norwegians and restaurants that employ a majority of immigrants, as well as mixed ones. Furthermore, such niche workplaces maybe more or less multinational, sometimes concentrating immigrants from a particular country, or employing migrants of different origins and few Norwegians.

While a workplace is a key site of intercultural transmission of values, norms and cultural codes, organisations are one of the crucial actors in developing and implementing strategies that foster immigrants’ socio-cultural inclusion (Syed, 2008; Van Riemsdijk et al., 2016; Van Tonder and Soontiens, 2014). As Van Tonder and Soontiens (2014: 1041) note, ‘for those migrants who secure some form of employment relatively early in their settlement in the host country, the work setting becomes a proxy for “community” by virtue of its social character and dynamics’. Investigating into immigrant niche workplaces thus helps to shed light on migrants’ everyday encounters with others and the impact of working in immigrant niches on immigrants’ perceptions of host society members.

Adaptation into new places remains a major obligation for immigrants who are often expected to accommodate to the host society and the workplace and not vice versa (Van
Riemsdijk et al., 2016). Thus, immigrants experience the adaptation as a one-sided process (Cederberg, 2015: 40; Erdal and Oeppen, 2013: 869), with receiving country members seemingly exempt from adapting to immigrants (Cederberg, 2015; Van Riemsdijk et al., 2016).

This article is particularly interested in the impact of working in and beyond immigrant niches on migrants’ cultural adaptation to the new socio-cultural field. The analysis is guided by the following three research questions: (1) How does working in immigrant niches influence Polish migrants’ adaptation in Norway? (2) How is their adaptation influenced by a prolonged time in immigrant niches and how by escape from immigrant niches? and (3) How do encounters of cultural difference influence Polish migrants’ perceptions of interpersonal communication and their work attitudes? The article analyses the conditions that foster and hinder cultural adaptation and the capacities that migrants develop to tackle difference through the meaning-making processes in their encounters with Norwegians. The article analyses participants’ struggles over the meaning of interpersonal conduct, their perceptions of differing cultural codes, and attitudes towards performing work. It shows how the experience of cultural difference influences transformation of their perceptions of interpersonal communication, work attitudes and practices, depending on whether they remain in or escape from the migrant niche.

Relationship between organisational and national cultures

Comparison of the conditions that prevail in the fields of migrant origin and destination illuminates the background of migrants’ experiences related to their intercultural encounters. When migrants seek to derive benefits from their knowledge and capital acquired in another country, they may encounter barriers. For example, taking the initiative to perform additional tasks or working overtime are acceptable or even desirable behaviours in the Polish workplace, but may be uncommon or undesirable in countries to which Polish migrants immigrate.

In the early seventies, Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede (1980) analysed over 100,000 questionnaires from a cross-national database characterising organisations and discovered that despite the high variety between organisations, the same ranking of answers could be observed by country. Departing from this observation, Hofstede has been developing his cultural dimensions theory to grasp and explain the relationship between organisational and national cultures. While his propositions have met with both credit and critique (e.g. McSweeney, 2009; Magala, 2005), the six dimensions characterising national organisational cultures proposed by Hofstede have gained wider recognition. Hofstede distinguished six dimensions on which organisational cultures differed significantly across countries: (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism and collectivism, (4) masculinity and femininity, (5) long- versus short-term orientation, and (6) indulgence and restraint.

According to his data, Polish and Norwegian nationally-shaped organisational cultures differ in four of the dimensions in particular: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity, and indulgence and restraint. Organisational cultures typical for Poland are characterised by large power distance, which means that inequality in power distribution is much more expected and accepted than in Norway. Poland also
has meaningfully higher values of masculinity and uncertainty indexes, indicating that
gender roles are more distinct than in Norway, where they nearly overlap, and that Poles
feel much more threatened by uncertain, unknown, ambiguous or unstructured situations
than Norwegians. Values of the last indicator imply that Norwegian society is character-
ised more by indulgence, while Polish culture more by restraint (Hofstede, 1980;
Hofstede and Minkov, 2013). Although differences among individuals from one country
may be more pronounced than differences among individuals across countries, Hofstede’s
scales aim to outline patterns of thinking that are reflected in the meanings people in dif-
ferent countries attach to specified aspects of life (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede
and Minkov, 2013).

As effective communication is crucial for cultural transmission (Suzuki, 1997), the
cultural differences that migrants face when entering workplaces in other countries may
pose issues for some of them. Those who lack linguistic, cultural and social resources
(Deeb and Bauder, 2015) are disadvantaged in terms of being able to transfer their pro-
fessional skills into the labour market and workplaces of the host country. This has a
cascading effect, impairing their access to other forms of capital as well (Deeb and
Bauder, 2015).

The socio-cultural and political conditions that have been influencing the mentalities
of people in Poland and Norway have differed considerably for the past few decades.
During the decades of Soviet Union rule over Poland, the communist party aimed to
construct a working-class society. Propaganda of the ‘hero worker’ and the discursive
construction of a ‘moral’ working class enhanced the significance of work status and
influenced workers’ social lives (Stenning, 2005b; Thatcher and Halvorsrud, 2016).
Although 30 years have passed since the collapse of communism, some authors agree
that the impact of these measures has persisted in people’s mentalities (Davies, 2007;
Neumann, 1999; Stenning, 2005a, 2005b). A study conducted at the beginning of the
new millennium showed that Poles’ attitudes towards work were characterised by uncer-
tainty and competition, manifested by the emergence of a culture of long working hours
and fear of taking holidays from work (Stenning, 2005a).

The qualities ascribed to the Scandinavian work ethos, on the contrary, are informal-
ity, equality, and restraint, flat hierarchies and flat wage structure, and a consensual,
participative and inclusive approach to decision-making and change implementation
(Schramm Nielsen et al., 2004). Some authors characterise the Scandinavian mentality
as ‘Jante mentality’ (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018; Gopal, 2000), invoking Sandemose’s
(1936) novel ‘A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks’ in which he formulated the 10 rules of the
Law of Jante, a fictional Danish town, to reflect the Scandinavian mentality. The main
message in the rules is that no one should try to stand out, to be overtly personally ambi-
tious, to be anything ‘more’ than others, to be different from others, or to consider them-
selves better or knowing more than others (Gopal, 2000; Sandemose, 1936). This ethos
of modesty about one’s successes and achievements is reflected in the organisational
culture (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018: 420).

The experience of cultural difference in regard to work attitudes was observed by
Wolanik Boström and Öhlander (2015), who studied Polish physicians’ experiences
related to their work in Swedish health care. The study participants, physicians with
professional experience of working in Poland or other countries, indicated that prior to
migration to Sweden they had become used to the individualistic approach to their careers and the need to take additional initiatives to achieve professional success and satisfactory earnings. They expressed disapprobation of the Swedish approach to work where the system dominates over individual initiative (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander, 2015). The work attitude they perceived as desirable turned out not to apply in the Swedish workplace.

These different attitudes are also observed by employers. A study by Friberg and Midtbøen (2017, 2019) found that Norwegian employers in the fish-processing and hotel industries consider Polish workers to be singularly efficient and hard-working compared to Norwegians. Although this may seem like a positive opinion, it brings a great deal of disadvantage to employees of Polish and Eastern European origin: Norwegian employers compare them to horses, able to work physically for up to 14 hours a day, but not suited for intellectual work, service or independent decision-making (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2017: 1472–1473).

**Theoretical framework: intercultural encounters and moments of consciousness of the habitus as catalysts of change**

Viewing workplaces as fields in Bourdieu’s sense allows for scrutiny of how immigrants’ habitus responds to the encountered field difference. Habitus is an acquired system of generative schemes, which shape thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent to the particular conditions of its production (Bourdieu, 1990: 55). The analysis explores participants’ reflections on the changes in their internalised perceptions of interpersonal communication and effective work as ‘moments of consciousness’ of the habitus. Although Bourdieu’s initial conceptualisations of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) emphasise the unconsciousness of the habitus, his later work allowed for ‘partially conscious’ aspects of the habitus, which are especially pronounced during new experiences (Bourdieu, 2005: 45). This article analyses ‘moments of consciousness’ of the habitus as accelerators of change, while habitus change is an element of cultural adaptation. Through the intercultural encounters, migrants gain insight into their own internalised perceptions, behaviours and dispositions, that is, their habitus, and tend to reflexively renegotiate and reconstruct it as a result, in order to adapt to the rules binding in the new field. Defining an interpersonal encounter as intercultural draws upon participants’ beliefs in their cultural foreignness, whereas the conduct of intercultural interaction represents an adaptation experience of greater scale (Ellingsworth, 1988: 261, 264–265).

Although Bourdieu’s theory has often been inequitably interpreted as a rejection of change, change is basically inscribed in the theory as an effect that emerges from the constant interaction between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 2005). Migrants enter the new labour market, where the unknown ‘rules of the game’ in Bourdieu’s terms are at stake and different forms of capital are valued. They cross the boundaries of fields where people use different sets of meanings and speech codes to communicate (Kotani, 2017: 463). A speech code is a resource that members of a certain speech community share for conducting and interpreting speech. This article approaches migrants’ recognition of speech codes
common in Norway as a cultural competence that is necessary for the recognition of the
unwritten rules of the new field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). This recognition, in turn, allows
migrants to ‘move from primary stratum of the meaning’ to the ‘stratum of secondary
meanings’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 2–3) of both verbal and non-verbal messages in interactions
with Norwegians. The concept of speech code enables analysis of people’s use of resources
to interpret their own and others’ actions and how their views of resources change in inter-
cultural interactions (Kotani, 2017). Unequipped with the ability to interpret the cultural
codes used in the field, migrants lack the ‘feel for the game’ that would not only give ‘the
game’ a subjective sense but also a direction and an orientation (Bourdieu, 1990: 66).

Research design

This study is based on data collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with Poles
who worked below their level of qualifications and professional experience after moving
to Norway. The semi-structured interview is a method which allows interviewees to fol-
low their own priorities and concerns (Morawska, 2018: 115) and to actively shape the
research inquiry (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018: 172). To elicit the most varied picture of
study participants’ experiences possible, the author applied maximum variation sampling
(Patton, 1990), including gender, age, place of residence, educational background and
performed profession. I interviewed 12 males and 18 females between 24 and 59 years
old, living in different cities, towns and villages in Norway. Prior to migrating to Norway,
study participants had completed different levels of education (5 vocational, 8 Bachelors,
15 Masters and 1 doctorate) in various disciplines. Their migration to Norway was fol-
lowed by downward professional mobility, meaning that they had undertaken jobs below
their level of education and work experience.

The interviews were conducted in Polish and had an average length of 1 hour and
40 minutes. The presented quotes were translated into English, with particular attention
given to preserving the original meaning of participants’ accounts. The Norwegian words
used by participants have been preserved, as their usage is itself subject to analysis.
English glosses are provided in parentheses.

I conducted narrative and thematic analysis (Byrne, 2018), having regard to the pur-
poses and circumstances of the participants’ accounts. The cross-case analysis allowed
me to identify and explore the differences, similarities and relationships within the diver-
sity. I remained sensitive to participants’ own perceptions and flexible in light of unex-
pected discoveries (Charmaz, 2006). In this way, participants’ accounts and own
categories became an integral part of the analysis. This study is a part of a larger doctoral
research project interested in experiences of downward professional mobility after immi-
gration. Issues relating to the impact of cultural differences in work-related experiences
between Poles and Norwegians have been a salient feature in the migrants’ narratives and
have therefore been problematised in this study.

The following sections analyse the interpretations and responses to the cultural differ-
ences encountered at the subsequent stages of professional careers in Norway. The first
part of the analysis focuses on meaning-making in intercultural communication in the
job-seeking process and at work. The second part explores the change of work attitudes
in light of the encountered cultural differences.
Perceptions of cultural difference in interpersonal communication

Struggles over meaning: a false smile or ordinary courtesy?

Out of the 30 study participants, 25 had begun their work in Norway in immigrant niches. At the time of the interviews, 14 still worked in such workplaces; thus, 9 had escaped from such immigrant niches, although for 4 of them, this was achieved through self-employment, where contact with Norwegians remained limited to service provider–customer relations. This reflects the fact that very few migrants have the opportunity to work in predominantly Norwegian working environments at all and especially in the initial phase of migration.

As migration theories indicate, migrant networks play an important role when migrants first settle into a new country (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2005; Massey et al., 1993; Tilly, 1990). This was also the case for the participants of this study, whose social interactions when they first moved to Norway were significantly or completely limited to those with other Poles. The workplace is the main, and sometimes the only, arena for migrants to make new social contacts. The majority of participants commenced job seeking only after migration to Norway and, for many, job interviews were one of the few direct encounters with Norwegians. The interpretations and meanings they attached to the conduct of these encounters significantly shaped their perceptions about Norwegians (cf. Van Tonder and Soontiens, 2014).

In the interviews, many study participants referred to ‘false smiling’ which, according to them, is common among Norwegians. Participants provided numerous examples of situations in which they were misled by this so-called false smiling. Most often, these were experiences related to job interviews and work-related situations. In the following quotation, Kaja provides an example of such a situation. At the time of the job interview, she was working as a domestic cleaner:

I was at the job interview at a geodesic company, and the guy said to me that everything was perfect, the conversation was held in English, he said that everything was so great and so on, he seemed to be really positive. Now I already know that it’s just their Norwegian-Swedish nice talking. And then he told me that if I just learnt a little Norwegian, I could come back after the summer and try to do this job or, something like that, that we could talk again. I was so happy and went out so excited from there, with a feeling that it was going to work out. And I quit the job I had at that time in order to learn Norwegian at the summer language course. The classes were held every day, during typical business hours, so I chose this course instead of the job [. . .] Obviously, this man, who at the interview was so cool, has never contacted me anymore. (Kaja; female; Bachelor of Engineering in Geodesy and Cartography; jobs in Norway over a three-year period: domestic cleaner, kitchen assistant, seller, customer service, surveyor)

The meaning that Kaja attached to the character and content of the job interview influenced the actions she undertook immediately after it, including resigning from her then-current job in order to study Norwegian intensively. The enthusiastic character of the verbal and non-verbal communication during the job interview made Kaja feel that learning Norwegian would secure her this job by the end of the holidays. Kaja’s
reference to the manner of communication characteristic of Swedes and Norwegians, which she called ‘just their Norwegian-Swedish nice talking’, indicates her disdainful attitude towards the meaningfulness of such communication. She also illuminates the ways in which she tended to interpret this ‘nice talking’ earlier and at the time of the interview, showing the reflexive learning process of the cultural speech codes and acquisition of cultural competence for more accurate interpretation of meanings. In her own evaluation, at the time of our conversation, she could understand the speech codes better than at the beginning of her stay in Norway. This was achieved by establishing contacts with Norwegians and Swedes after she escaped from the migrant niche and began to work in a geodesic company. During the interview, Kaja reflected widely on her previous intercultural encounters and her numerous misinterpretations of the conduct of these encounters. A sense of discomfort resulting from the perceived discrepancy between the positive feedback she received during job interviews and lack of any further contact from the recruiters or potential employers was common among participants. This is how Piotr described his experiences:

P: Once I applied for a job somewhere, as always, Norwegians were smiling at me, ‘yes, great, you’ve great qualifications, you’re flink (EN: good) bla bla bla’, and then it turns out that you don’t get an invitation to an interview follow-up. [. . .]
A: So if a conversation looks like that, when they are very kind, does it make you have such a feeling that something more can result from it?
P: Yes, sometimes, it depends. But in fact, very often, when at first glance they are so kind, they try to listen to you, they smile, then you think ‘Fine, it’ll be ok’., and then it turns out that, there is no reply at all and that’s what depresses me. (Piotr, male, Masters degree in Hospitality and Tourism; job during six years in Norway: cleaner)

When describing the dissonance between the promising meanings they attached to the course of the encounters and the lack of any further contact from the recruiters’ side, participants tended to use Norwegian words and phrases. They often spoke about these experiences ironically, often using the Norwegian word ‘flink’ (EN: good). The use of Norwegian phrases stems from their experiences, with the implication that saying ‘you are so good’ in Norwegian does not bear the same meaning or expected consequences as when used in Polish. When they heard this statement, participants had the feeling that the employer would definitely be interested in their candidacy. Kaja summarised her experiences with job interviews in Norway as follows:

I have been to many job interviews [in Norway], and each of them was so positive. [. . .] All of them were cool, pleasant, I kept hearing that I was so flink (EN: good) that I spoke Norwegian.
When I hear it over and over again . . . I’d rather they didn’t say anything. [. . .] how many times can you hear that you’re so flink and so on, but ‘thank you and lykke til videre’ (EN: good luck further).

Kaja’s case exemplifies the common pattern of transformation in participants’ reception of job interviewers’ conduct, from enthusiasm to frustration and distrust. Most commonly, at the beginning of their stay in Norway, participants interpreted such courtesy
and smiling as expressions of sympathy and favourable prognosis for their future professional careers in Norway. Although initially interpreted as promising, job interviews, accompanied by subsequent failure, led them to perceive this courtesy as fake and having a second, dissembled meaning.

**Cultural distrust**

Multiple experiences of uncertainty towards the meaning of Norwegian courtesy led some participants to a sense of cultural distrust, manifested by perceiving Norwegians as duplicitous. This clearly involves a perceived homogeneity of Norwegians and generalisation regarding their cultural features. Blanka explains her perception of the difference in communication between Poles and Norwegians, with respect to the meaning of being nice to someone:

B:  For example, in Poland if you like someone, then you like him and you meet with him, and in Norway if someone is nice to you, he or she doesn’t necessarily like you. If someone smiles at you, it doesn’t mean that he or she likes you. [. . .] So here, there are some double standards, some official, the official level where you can talk and the one that can be [more appropriate] at home somewhere, not with everyone.

A:  So this is such kindness, right? In these public places, because it is about situations at work?

B:  In general about all their thinking, there are two such faces, the one for people, and the other at home. *(Blanka, female, Bachelors degree in Social Psychology, job during five years in Norway: kitchen employee)*

This cultural distrust is particularly articulated by the use of the phrases ‘double standards’ and ‘two faces’, which illustrate that courtesy in everyday encounters is perceived as disjunct from what the interlocutors ‘really think’. Like many other participants, Blanka perceived being nice to someone regardless of one’s real feelings to comprise a double standard and to be insincere. In reference to the experiences which Blanka shared with me, I asked her whether she had experienced any cultural clashes with her husband, who is Norwegian. She described extensively their negotiations over the appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing feelings and emotions, stating:

I always say what I think and he now teaches me that I can’t say what I think because we’ll have a child and it is safe for the child to talk appropriately what should be said, that some things are not proper to talk about, that certain issues are to be kept for ourselves.

Negotiations with her husband had led her to reflect on transforming her own perceptions of the ‘natural’ ways of expressing and communicating feelings and thoughts. I propose calling such reflections ‘moments of consciousness of the habitus’, bringing attention to the turning points for habitus change. The encounter with cultural differences facilitated Blanka’s reflexive insights into her own, previously unconscious, culturally shaped predispositions and perceptions. Although Blanka consciously reflected on her own attitudes, she simultaneously evinced cultural distrust towards the honesty of what she perceived as a
more Norwegian way of communication (e.g. restraint in expressing feelings). During the interview, it emerged that apart from contact with her husband, her relations with Norwegians were rather limited, although she had worked for 5 years in a company employing dozens of workers. After Blanka had told me about the multinational character of her workplace, I asked her whether Norwegians also worked there. She replied as follows:

B: There was one Norwegian guy, my husband, and one girl, and once there was an assistant who was Norwegian. While 70 people work there now so . . .

A: Do you have any idea why it’s like that?

B: Because lots of immigrants work here, and that’s why Norwegians don’t work here.

A: But don’t they take these kind of jobs or how it’s like? Because they probably work somewhere right?

B: They just don’t want to work with those [non-Norwegian] people, I don’t know why. But there are other restaurants [operated by the same company] where exclusively Norwegians work.

Although Blanka had direct access to Norwegian culture, had a Norwegian partner and was a member of a Norwegian family, her contact with Norwegians at the workplace was only occasional. Prior to leaving the migrant niche, her perceptions of Norwegians were shaped mainly by experiences with co-workers, which shows that the workplace is of crucial importance for adaptation processes. In the following section, I elaborate on this point, arguing that workplaces (non-migrant niches) are salient social spaces for migrants to recognise different cultural codes and initiate the adaptation process.

Outside of immigrant niches

Those immigrants who do work among Norwegians demonstrate a greater appreciation of what they perceive as the Norwegian work style and way of communicating. Marlena was one of the few who had gained longer, desired work experience in Norway in a typically Norwegian working environment. At the time of the interview, she had lived in Norway for 10 years, performing the satisfying job of a bank advisor for 4 of those years. The following quotation demonstrates how attitudes towards differences in interpersonal communication and relations change over time. Marlena said the following:

The working environment [in Norway] is another thing. Although you might not like each other, nobody would do anything unpleasant to anybody, right? Everyone would create such an insincere atmosphere so that everything would be beautiful and nice. Although, as I said, someone at work might actually not like you, but you can get along just great anyway! It used to annoy me in the past as I used to think that it’s better to be honest. Not like here; ‘you have the same smile for all the time’, and one just doesn’t know how to interpret it. But after some time, I came to the conclusion that it’s better! I don’t need to meet with him after work after all, I don’t go to the parties with them, I just spend time at work with him, so actually, ‘let’s be humans’ I thought, great! It’s really cool. (Marlena; female; Masters degree in Economics; jobs during 10 years in Norway: domestic cleaner, banking apprentice, bank advisor)
This quote shows the reflexive transformation of Marlena’s attitude towards expressing her opinions and feelings. From perceiving the Norwegian way of relating and communicating in terms of insincerity and dishonesty, she changed her perception to view this as a more human way of relating at work. She pointed to her previous struggles with interpreting the meaning of Norwegian interlocutors’ smiles in conversations, but the opportunity to work with Norwegians facilitated her recognition and adaptation to new cultural codes. Marlena’s case shows how cultural distrust can change to appreciation. Working with Norwegians enabled her to achieve a different understanding of the cultural codes and to adjust to the Norwegian-speaking community. Learning new cultural codes is a valuable resource and contributes to accumulation of country-specific cultural capital and cultural competence allowing for adaptation. This undoubtedly leads to more effective communication with colleagues and superiors by supporting the integration of immigrants into the work environment.

Work performance and work attitudes

Attempts to recognise the ‘rules of the game’

The study participants struggled not only with the meanings of verbal and non-verbal communication as shown above, but also strived to comprehend the rules at work and to acquire recognition for their cultural capital. Ola discussed her experiences working as a kitchen assistant in a restaurant as follows:

It was very difficult for me, not to be able to guess or discover the rules that were binding at work. I mean that I feel that I could never understand what the Norwegian employer actually expected from me. (Ola; female; Masters degree in Human Resources; jobs during 4.5 years in Norway: kitchen employee, restaurant assistant and cleaner; self-employed Norwegian language teacher)

In many cases, the boss was the only Norwegian in the workplace; thus, migrants had little opportunity to observe from co-workers the work attitudes that would be more common for Norwegian workplaces. Ola’s experience of uncertainty regarding the expectations from the employer’s side was not uncommon. The majority of participants reported that they struggled with the lack of recognition of the effort they put into performing tasks at work. Despite being overqualified for the jobs they performed, they attempted to perform their work as well as possible and expected those efforts to be noticed. The following quote illustrates how Ola continued to reflect upon her experiences and her disappointed expectations of her employers’ response to her efforts:

I came to conclusion that OK., maybe it simply works like this: there are some things required to be done and no one is going to be glad that I’ve done them, so I accepted this fact. But then I realised that no matter how good I was at fulfilling my tasks even if I worked my fingers to the bone, no one would note my effort, even if I had been reporting for work half an hour earlier every day, even if I had been taking the earlier train in order not to be late and if I had been starting my work half an hour earlier than I was supposed to and had been preparing and cutting and stuff, even if I had been doing really, really well, even if . . . just no way, forget it.
Lack of recognition of what Ola perceived as a desirable work performance led her to feel frustrated. Like many participants, Ola perceived being a hard-working employee as valuable capital. The features which participants tended to indicate as desirable in an employee were taking the initiative to perform tasks beyond one’s duties, willingness to work additional hours and supreme productivity. These perceptions may stem from how attitudes towards work in the Polish work environment have been shaped by the legacy of the ‘hero worker’ propaganda (Stenning, 2005a, 2005b; Thatcher and Halvorsrud, 2016). However, as the further analysis will demonstrate, in favourable conditions, migrants changed their perceptions of what a ‘good worker’ is.

The study participants who had the chance to work beyond immigrant niches came to recognise not only the new cultural codes but also the differences between their attitudes and what they perceived to be a more Norwegian work attitude. They then consciously adapted to the new work mode, either by redefining or preserving their capital, depending on whether their work attitude met with rejection or appreciation. Prior to his migration to Norway, Hubert had participated in an international project, performing a high-rank function and cooperating with Norwegian colleagues. At an employee meeting, employees were asked to write their reflections regarding a problem raised during the meeting and to send them to the leaders by Thursday (several days after the meeting). Hubert recalled this incident as follows:

So I came back from this meeting, I sat down at the computer, wrote what I had to, and sent it. A moment later, one of the leaders came up to me and said ‘Hubert, if we say that we’ll do something by Thursday, then send it to me on Thursday morning, on Wednesday afternoon at the earliest, don’t send it to me immediately’. And I did it in a Polish way, you know, I had the answer in my head, and in Poland, there was a saying, ‘we do impossible things immediately, whereas for a miracle, we need less than 7 days’, but the impossible we do at once. (Hubert; male; Masters degree in National Defence; jobs during 11 years in Norway: cleaner, handy man. Prior to migration, he performed highly skilled work in an international project in Norway)

Hubert interpreted his attitude towards performing the given tasks as a collective and common feature of Poles, not as his own individual attitude. Although he perceived the immediate completion of the task as part of the capital of a hard-working employee, his attitude and behaviour met with disapproval and rejection. Thus, the capital that Hubert considered valuable, in the form of his approach to performing the job, went unrecognised and was even disapproved of. Immediate task realisation, promptness and hard work also appeared in Kamil’s narrative, who recollected his work performance as a kitchen employee as follows:

I was doing a lot by myself, I was running back and forth, I was working hard like a fool to impress my boss, to make him see what I am able to do, dumb me right? (laughs) Let him appreciate me, and he kept telling me ‘yes. I’ll extend your contact’, but he never really wanted to extend it. (Kamil; male; Masters degree in Political Science; jobs during five years in Norway: platform employee, kitchen employee, bus driver)
Kamil treated hard work and making a special effort as means of improving the job contract, which indicates his perception of the right way to conduct work. In the quotation, he evaluates his previous work attitude as ‘dumb’, showing that his approach has significantly changed since then.

**Adjusting to the field: change in work attitudes**

When illuminating his current work attitude, Kamil expressed his appreciation of the Scandinavian work attitude on numerous occasions, as exemplified by his utterance:

> Well, all that [Scandinavian] laid-back attitude. I have already learnt it and I like it a lot. I stopped hurrying, at least at work. I remember when I started [to work as a bus driver], when I came to work, and for example, how stupid I was running around this bus parking lot and looking for this bus, and then it turned out that it was somewhere at a service station or something. But wait, I came to work, I clocked in on time like always, I fulfilled my duty. Now, if someone parked the bus somewhere else, or that someone did something, it’s simply not my business. [. . .] Now, when they tell me that there is no bus available for me, it’s different, but at that time, 1.5 years ago, I would have been sitting there drenched in sweat and worrying about what I would be doing in two hours and that I would be late. Now [in such situation] I go out, take coffee and say to them: if you find [a bus], I’ll be there and you can let me know. Really [. . .] One probably has to learn it or get used to it . . . I can tell you honestly, I feel that I fit in here in Norway, I feel good here.

Kamil’s case exemplifies the gradual transformation of his habitus. He reflects in detail on the work attitudes that have changed due to self-reflection incited by ‘moments of consciousness’ of the habitus. The change does not, however, follow immediately. The change is a lengthy process, as the habitus does not automatically adjust to the new field (Bourdieu, 2005). Kamil already appreciated the Scandinavian work mode on the occasion of his first job in Norway on the oil platform, as illustrated below:

> I loved to work with Scandinavians, especially with Danes. It’s not without reason that they are considered probably the happiest nation in the world according to some research, really. The work used to begin with drinking coffee. Yes. Then, we checked together what should be done, and then we had a coffee again.

The change of his own approach to work was not immediate. A change of internalised perceptions involves a long-lasting reflexive process and is related to whether migrants obtain the opportunity to become acquainted with Norwegian culture by working in the Norwegian or Scandinavian environment and whether their capital, or more precisely what they perceive to comprise the capital of a good worker, becomes recognised. As boasting and ‘sticking one’s neck out’ are not appreciated in cultures that value equality like the Scandinavian culture (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018; Smith et al., 2003), the initiatives Polish workers took in conducting additional duties met with disapproval and rejection in most cases. However, in a few cases, employers discerned the value in employees taking on additional duties and their high work rate. Marlena juxtaposed her and her co-workers’ productivity as follows:
I noticed at my workplace that I served 100–200 customers a day, while my Norwegian colleagues 20–30. I was raising the bar, it isn’t cool, right? They had developed some deliberate work mode and hadn’t cared so much about the result, and suddenly someone came there, and she not only talks to customers, but also knows some ways to do it faster.

As she noted, her approach to work did not necessarily meet with the approval of all of her co-workers, but in the interview, Marlena widely discussed her boss’s appreciation and commendation of her efficiency. This shows the tendency of migrants to preserve what they perceive as the capital of a good worker when such capital receives recognition.

Conclusion

As shown in this article, working in immigrant niches significantly influences migrants’ adaptive capacities. A prolonged time spent working in immigrant niches prevents migrants from recognition of cultural codes and ‘the rules of the game’ prevailing in the new field, thereby limiting their adaptation to the Scandinavian socio-cultural space. When working only with other migrants, immigrants are essentially deprived of interactions with representatives of Norwegian culture. Their limited contact with Norwegians leads to cultural misunderstandings and cultural distrust. As shown by examples of migrants who left immigrant niches to take up employment among Norwegians, migrants quite quickly begin to recognise and apply new cultural codes in their interactions with work colleagues. This demonstrates the importance of counteracting downward professional mobility among migrants. Based on the findings presented herein, it seems that given the opportunity to work among representatives of the destination country’s culture, migrants’ awareness of cultural differences increases. As a result, they begin to develop adaptation strategies and change their own behaviours to enable them to function more effectively in their professional lives in the new socio-cultural space. Taking into account the large scale of modern human mobility (Antonsich, 2018) and the phenomenon of channelling migrants into immigrant niches (Rath, 2002; Waldinger, 1994), these findings are significant not only in the context of Norway but also in other countries where migrants face occupational and social marginalisation in their everyday lives, often unable to get out of migrant niches due to structural barriers. Further research would benefit from analysis of how working in non-immigrant niches affects the integration and adaptation of migrants in different areas of social life, such as neighbourhoods and circles of friends.

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