Workaholic or easygoing? Interpretations of National Culture in Industries with Immigrant Workforce in Finland

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Abstract

Growing immigration creates linguistically and culturally diverse working environments. National cultural characteristics are common concepts in everyday discourse in culturally heterogeneous workplaces as well as in academic research on work environments and management. By analysing empirical interview data from two arenas of productive activity in Finland, we show how national cultural characteristics are understood differently depending on the structural positioning of the arena in the local–national–transnational–global continuum. The data consists of a total of 53 in-depth interviews of foreign-born and Finnish-born experts working in high tech industries and research organizations, and white-collar and blue-collar workers in metal industries. Results illuminate how national interactive specificity is interpreted differently in global and local–national productive arenas. For instance, depending on the type of work, Finns could be describe as workaholics or as easy-going employees. The most central national cultural stereotypes have different interpretations among employees in the high tech business (global arena) and metal industries (mainly local and national arena).

Keywords: national culture, stereotypes, migrant labour, transnational interaction

Background

Migration and the globalization of business, media and education are leading to a ubiquitous interculturality in modern societies. In intercultural business and technical communication (IBTC) and management studies, the most influential frameworks for examining intercultural interaction in the workplace have been Geert Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory and Edward Hall's (1976) contexting model. Both of these models, as well as many other developments of them, build on the taken-for-granted

idea of national cultures, a notion which has also been severely criticized empirically (e.g. Cardon 2008; Gerhart and Fang 2005), methodologically (e.g. McSweeney 2002; Williamson 2002) and theoretically (e.g. Ailon 2008; Witte 2012).

Despite the critiques, these two frameworks along with other functionalist models (e.g. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; Schwartz and Sagiv 1995) still inform the majority of the empirical research activity on intercultural communication in work environments as no alternative theoretical models suitable for nomothetic methodologies have emerged (Williamson 2002; Alcazar et al. 2013). One of the recent empirical studies testing the hypothesis of national cultural effects on leadership preferences states that the influence of national culture overrides differences based on professional group, gender or age group in leadership preferences when branches of the same multinational company are examined (Zander and Romany 2004). Gerhart and Fang (2005) in turn came to the conclusion that factors other than national cultural differences explain the main part of variance in human resource management between countries. They pointed out the importance of organizational cultures and national economic characteristics in affecting such differences. These attempts to contextualize national cultural differences and their importance in management and intercultural interaction have nevertheless left largely unexamined how particular arenas of economic activity differ in their interpretation of national cultural characteristics. In this study, such arenas refer to the professional or industry level rather than to organizational cultures only.

Here, we will compare the conceptions of national cultural features within two distinctive and structurally very differently positioned arenas of economic activity in the North European nation state of Finland: high tech industries and metal industries. By comparing experiences of intercultural interaction in these two arenas we aim to offer a description of how national cultural conceptualizations reflect the structural features of the arena itself. Thus our study participates in the wider discussion about the role of national cultural stereotypes and conceptualizations in intercultural business and technical communication in societies experiencing growing immigration.

Theoretical frame of reference

Culture and national culture
The concept of culture has been undergoing fundamental redevelopment and redefinition in sociocultural anthropology as well as in other social sciences over the last few decades, and the use of the term in an essentialist, mosaic-like sense has hardly any defenders. The type of functionalist models for researching national cultures that are represented in the work of Hofstede, Hall, Swartz and Trompenaars, among others, require a realist and rather monolithic approach to culture that is vulnerable to easy criticism. Following Hofstede (1980), national culture is generally seen as implicit, fundamental, systematically causal, territorially unique and shared (McSweeney 2002, 91). All the models of the nomothetic study of national cultural differences in management and or-

ganizational studies take for granted that nations are culturally more or less homogenous, creating a shared, abstract national culture. Manifestations of psychological, historical, religious, economic and generational differences between societies are easily collapsed into "national cultural differences" (Witte 2012).

Culture is an abstract generalization that has a common sense meaning for actors in social situations, but also refers to a theoretical concept of culture as knowledge in the wider sense of the term. The latter includes a corpus of substantive assertions, ideas and representations in the form of words, symbols and actions, as transmitted in institutionalized social relations (Barth 2002, 3). Thus, while avoiding here an idea of national cultures as shared, we do not agree with the extreme constructivist point of view of culture as an invention or a discourse. We take the social malleability and context-specificity of cultural values and social realities as given. There is fairly strong consensus that national culture is not homogenous, but there are various subcategories shaping cultural interactions, including both professional and organizational cultures that are highly relevant for this study (e.g. Collier 2014, 55; Robinson-Easley 2014, 3).

The particularity of national culture, compared to culture in its other abstracted manifestations, derives from its political character. National cultures do not exist as "culture-for-itself" but are essentially consciously moulded via media and education (Anderson 1983) for the purposes of forming political sovereignty and harnessing patriotism. Thus, national culture cannot be studied without taking this political intentionality into account. National culture and national stereotypes are meaningful for people's identifications and for shaping their consciousness of difference and power relations (Witte 2012). This means that national cultures are important in working environments and organizations, even if we do not impute an essentialist nomothetical value to national culture as an explanation for behaviour. Rather than as a nomothetical value, national culture is in this paper interpreted to be meta-culture that frames the various organizational, professional and other arenas shaping the behaviour and interactions to certain extent, but significantly shaped by these more practical and day-to-day arena.

Because they are believed in by people, national characteristics become real and affect behaviour and social relations. In the case of a migrant labour force, the notion of cultural specificity is an issue that creates the feeling of difference and may at its worst lead to exclusion. Here we ask why it is that certain features come to be seen as important national characteristics in a particular context and how these images influence intercultural learning in working environments. The difficulty of defining what actually is a national cultural set of values or a work-related ethos is well illustrated by the contrasting interpretations of Finnish management style. Some analysts see the "power distance" in Finnish management as low, some as relatively high, and some witness uncertainty avoidance as low while others see it as high (Tukiainen 2010). It is impossible to determine a single "Finnish" way of management, values or working ethos – national characteristics are situated, context dependent and relational.

In this article we will examine *in what particular ways* national cultures are situated,

context-dependent, and relational. How is the structural position of the arena in the local–global continuum reflected in the interpretation and creation of Finnishness in the workplace? We ask about the basis of empirical data and what meaning and importance employees give to the national cultural differences when they try to understand everyday mundane interactions in their workplace. Is it possible to discover uniformity in the different interpretations of Finnishness between different productive working environments?

Arena

When analysing the different notions of national culture that people imply in speaking about interaction between foreign-born and locally-born employees, we have made use of the concept of the arena. We consider metal industries and high tech environments to be examples of arenas. The term "arena" is here understood from the perspective of the spatio-relational qualities derived from the importance of networks and relations at the local–national–transnational–global levels. People in the high tech arena encounter social practices and cultural competences that work in transnational or global spaces, while the metal industries manifest relations that are mainly local or national, but sometimes transnational.

An arena refers to a mediating institution where people interact with each other and where larger structural forces determine the logic of the field. An arena has certain resemblances to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field", in the sense that the arena sets the limits within which the actors have to manoeuvre to compete for symbolic, social and material forms of capital. An arena here refers to what Louise Lamphere (1992) termed "mediating institutions"; that is, institutional settings that are moored into a certain logic of action derived from a larger structure that governs particular workplaces as sites of social action. The position of a particular productive site within the local–global continuum affects, for example, recruitment practices, marketing activities and many other mundane practices that take place in the workplace. Further, is should be noticed, that type of knowledge itself used in the production process may be more global and universal (scientific knowledge) or national and local (experience based knowledge) by its nature (Jensen et al. 2007, 682). Although there are several studies and text books concerning the multicultural work environments (e.g. Byrds & Scott 2014) and recently especially social and care work related fields have been studied both internationally (e.g Almutairi & McCarthy 2012) and also in Finland specifically (e.g. Vartiainen et al, 2016), the unique quality in this paper is the comparative approach discussing the different cultural interpretations of national culture among the two different industries.

Arenas have relatively stable modes of conduct that are reflected in the means and ends of activities. Both high-tech businesses and metal industries function in the realm of economic rationality: they exist for economic aims. However, the ways of securing capital, organizing production and marketing the product are very different depending

on the field of reference, as exemplified by questions about the role of global capital, the intercultural workforce and the kind of customers the product marketed at. We claim that these issues are also reflected in the conceptualizations of national characteristics among the workforce.

Although transnational and global factors are becoming increasingly important in the business and technical fields, national environments and cultural characteristics still have an impact on operational environments (see Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000). Cultural interactive specificities observed by people in everyday interaction easily acquire national meanings (Trux 2010). The notion of national cultural specificity has its own history and importance for self-identification. In the case of Finland, national culture carries the weight of the history of the national awakening since the 19th century when language, ethnicity and nationhood were all built into a nationalistic image of shared cultural community (Alapuro 1994). Nationalism has been the driving force in the formation of an independent nation-state and the establishment of a national cultural distinctiveness an ongoing political project for nearly two centuries.

Data, methods and the arenas

The methodological frame of reference adopted in this study is ideographic, qualitative and interpretive. We consider it as necessary to understand national cultural stereotyping from the postnational (Witte 2012), intercultural (Otten and Geppert 2009) and transnational (Koehn and Rosenau 2010) perspectives, paying heed to the self-reflexivity of the investigator. The research data consists of 34 semi-structured interviews with high tech experts and 19 interviews with white-collar and blue-collar employees in metal industries, a total of 53 interviews in three urban areas (see Table 1).[1] Several people from the same work places were intentionally interviewed in order to gain insights into their differing points of view on intercultural interaction from the perspective of foreign born and locally born employees.[2] Interviewees were recruited mainly by contacting team leaders, entrepreneurs or local union leaders. Nearly all interviews were carried out during the working day in the workplace, for example in an office or in a lunch room. Participation was voluntary and the interviewees' agreement to participate was secured prior to their inclusion in the study. Some interviews were carried out in English or Russian, but most in Finnish. The foreign-born interviewees (n = 30) were from various European countries, South and South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East, but a high proportion were Europeans. The selection of the respondents was not possible to do based on sex, age or other qualities, due to fact that number of foreign-born workers in the sample firms was often very low at the moment of empirical study.

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1 The areas were the metropolitan area of Helsinki and Tampere and Joensuu regions.
2 The data were collected as part of a wider study funded by the Academy of Finland (see Pitkänen 2011; Raunio & Säävälä 2011).

Table 1. Number of interviewees according to the arena and background (N = 53)

	Finns	Foreign-born	TOTAL
Metal industries	10	9	19
High tech	13	21	34
TOTAL	23	30	53

High tech experts were interviewed in six enterprises and in two research institutes. The businesses were in ICT and the institutes were in biotechnology and applied natural science. In most of the high tech environments English was the main means of communication among the employees. The interviewees were mainly young adults, only three were older than 45. Two thirds of the interviewees were men. Nearly all of them had a degree from a polytechnic or university and they acted as experts or managers in their organizations. This was the case both with the foreign-born and the Finnish-born interviewees. In some of the organizations, 30 to 40 per cent of the employees were foreign born. Most of the foreign-born interviewees had arrived in Finland as labour migrants, while some had come after marriage to a Finn or had remained in Finland after completing their studies. In this context the voices of female and male respondents were not a focus in the analysis, but also their answers were not really different from each other, and thus did not spur us to steer the analysis to this direction.

Interviewees in the **metal industries** came from ten different firms and were educationally and socially quite distinct from the high tech interviewees. They had mostly primary or secondary education and they were comparatively older. They worked as skilled workers (welders, tinsmiths, mechanics) or as foremen and office workers. Most of the foreign-born interviewees had come to Finland for other reasons than work: as family members, asylum seekers, or students. Quite contrary to the high tech situation, most of the interviewees were the only foreign-born employees in their work place, although some firms had earlier had a larger workforce from abroad.

The arenas of the metal industries and high tech businesses differ starkly in their interactive routines and forms of productive organization. In both arenas the employees are skilled in their respective fields and in Finland they mostly produce for export. The major difference in terms of intercultural relations and learning is their position vis-à-vis globalization and organizational models. Expert organizations, such as high tech ones, are commonly non-hierarchical or flat and built on teamwork, which means that interaction is horizontal and discursive. In metal industries, the organization is more hierarchical and the interaction flows are directed from above. In expert organizations individual responsibility is high and self-regulation is the norm, the objectives are longer term and everyday interaction is more international (see Ståhle and Grönroos 1999). In metal firms productivity is determined more visibly in the here-and-now, and productive work is more closely monitored by foremen.

Finland is a Nordic country of 5.5 million inhabitants that has experienced a very fast structural transformation from an agricultural society to industrial and post-industrial society since the 1950s. The country is a relatively homogenous nation state although an indigenous minority of the Sami, a number of Roma people as well as two national languages and a minority of orthodox Christians have created diversity for a long time. Immigration has been a recent phenomenon. During the postwar period Finland was a country of emigration and it was not until the 1990s when the number of immigrants started to rapidly rise to its current ca. 6 per cent of the population (in 2014; Statistics Finland 2016). Highly skilled migrant labour has been attracted to the country by the phenomenal growth of the ICT sector along with the success of Nokia between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s (Raunio and Forsander 2009), and until the recession of 2008 the metal industries also experienced a labour shortage that resulted in the attraction of labour migrants in Finland.

The method of analysis for this study was qualitative content analysis (Patton 2002). The practical approach taken was directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) in which initial coding starts with a pre-existing theory or relevant earlier research findings. The data were gathered as part of a wider research project on intercultural interaction in workplaces. In this article, the interview data that relates to the characteristics of the Finns and the Finnish way of working are analysed.

The authors carried out the interviews in two localities while another researcher interviewed workers in the third locality. We are both white Finnish nationals, native speakers of Finnish, one male and one female, aged in our 40s. Being identified as highly educated, professional Finnish nationals had its impact on the interaction in both of the arenas. In the metal industries, the interviewees were generally less well educated and from a lower social class background than the interviewer; also, the gender dynamics were evident when the interviewer of predominantly male interviewees was female. In the high tech environment, the interviewees evidently felt more at ease with talking to the interviewers, largely sharing their educational and class position. In both arenas, the interviewee accounts have to be interpreted as presentations to a native Finnish national. The names used are pseudonyms and all details that could potentially lead to recognition of the interviewee or the workplace are left out.

Results
The image of the "workaholic Finn"

The ideology of individuality appeared to be very widely accepted by interviewees in both arenas, irrespective of their educational or class background. The general reaction to questions probing potential differences between ethnic or national groups as a workforce was denial: nearly everybody cited the opinion that national features are secondary and everyone is first and foremost an individual and should be approached as such. The

issue of national cultural differences sometimes aroused mild rejection, sometimes out-right scorn. Interviewees were aware of the moral danger of stereotyping. However, when discussing other topics, the conceptions of national and ethnic differences came up by an indirect route.

The major national stereotype that surfaced in interviews of both the foreign-born and the Finnish interviewees in the metal industries was the stereotypical image of the hard-working Finn. Anton, a native of Britain, expressed the widespread image of the honest, ardent Finnish worker:

> *I think they're very honest, hard-working, very hard-working, [they] take their work and their life seriously.*[3]

Also, a Finnish welder Seppo, who had worked as a young man for years in Sweden as a guest worker, described the "mad Finn", witnessing the existence of the cult of work:

> *Well the Finn is so to say workaholic, that's true. I have seen it as a migrant boy abroad, the Finn just **is** [word stressed] workaholic; there is no denying it. Finnish working morale is quite high.*

In the shipyard where he was currently working, he observed a difference between foreign workers and the Finns. The "*more lax working routine, so to speak*" of the foreign-born workers created a negative reaction among the local workers. Stories of foreign workers who were either unable to carry out their duties or left the workplace after realizing how hard the Finns were working circulated among the workers, strengthening the feeling of national difference. If the interviewee had a foreign-born colleague who was a hard worker, it was considered important to stress that this particular individual was "*as hard a worker as the Finns*". This implies that hard working was considered to be a characteristic of the Finns while the others were by definition less hard working, unless they could prove otherwise.

Ali, who had come to Finland as a refugee from the Middle East, explained that he could not be absent from work even if he is sick because he would be suspected of work evasion. He could not spend time on the net or listen to the radio at the workplace, even in the slack hours, because, according to him, anyone seeing him doing so would interpret that as a sign of foreigners' laziness. Raivo, a welder from the neighbouring Estonia, identified himself with the Finns and considered a difference existed between "us" and the workforce originating from further south:

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3 Quotations are from interviews; direct transcripts are in English or are translations from Finnish or Russian. Brackets [ ] mark additions, parentheses (…) refer to omissions and three full stops … imply a pause.

Well, it is really different with those Poles, they are different kinds of people. Or they have different manners in some way. Or with the work, they have to be su-pervised more [laughs] for some reason; their working culture is so different, it is not so careful.

The frame that both Finnish and foreign-born workers in metal industries used to con-textualize Finnishness centred on the value of hard work to the Finns. The foreign born had to position themselves as workers in relation to this master narrative. The cult of work is said to derive from the peasant pragmatism in Finland (Apo 1996) and is seen as also affecting the ICT field (Trux 2010).

Even though the idea of the cult of work also came through in some of the high tech experts' interviews, in their responses accountability was stressed as a particularly Finnish trait much more than hard work. For example Johannes, who had studied abroad and also worked in India for a few months as a commissioned worker, described Finnishness by stressing responsibility, accountability and independent initiative:

Finns just do it. When we take these two, Americans and Indians, they don't do it if they don't have a boss watching over. So in that sense, in the working life, I'm a Finn; work has to be done.

The stereotype of the hard-working-Finn was even less shared by foreign-born employ-ees in the high tech businesses. For example Shiva, who had originated from South Asia and who had also worked in the United States, described the Finnish working mentality as "easy-going". His comment entailed a hidden critique:

From the working culture, it is very easy. Very easy-going, they [the Finns] are very dedicated to their work but not necessarily extra work. They take the respon-sibility very seriously, I don't see any problem here. They take the responsibility.

The interviewee first stated that the working life was easy-going, but quickly wanted to correct his statement, as if realizing that it was not polite to point to the laziness of the Finnish workers to a Finnish interviewer. The stress on responsibility appeared to hide some degree of dissatisfaction with the working style of his Finnish colleagues. He felt that the Finns are unwilling to work overtime unlike himself; they cannot wait to return to their families straight away after official working hours. This same idea was brought up by some young, childless interviewees in biotechnology who com-mented on their colleagues with children (for similar statements, see Silfver 2010).

Also in Raunio's (2002; Raunio and Forsander 2009) study of expatriate high tech experts in Finland, the interviewees described the Finnish environment as less compet-itive and stressful than in other countries, particularly in Asia and the United States. Short working hours that made family life easier were emphasized as a positive char-acteristic of working life in Finland. Thus Finns working in the high tech arena were

more commonly described as family and leisure-oriented people than as work-oriented or workaholic employees. In the metal industries, high work morale and dedication to work was the central concept in understanding Finnish national culture, both among the Finnish workers and among the migrant workers. However, in the high tech environment the image of the "workaholic Finn" was rarely referred to in interviews, since compared to the experiences of interviewees who had worked in the USA or Asia, it was not really seen as an accurate description.

Finnishness as an engineering mindset?

In the high tech businesses, the Finnish environment was seen as a natural continuation that fitted hand-in-glove the "engineering mindset": the interviewees, both migrants and locals, considered that they had a down-to-earth, goal oriented and pragmatic approach to the world, as described by Pierre, a French ICT engineer:

> We [ICT engineers of different nationalities] have, well, clear goals in a way. We know where we want to go, I mean my experience, (…) my experience is, good, we're pushing the same direction [with the Finns], it's easy.

In an expert organization the members of its community are interpreted first and foremost as experts who are united by their shared interest and expertise (see also Mahadevan 2009). Only after this professional identification comes the national or personal characteristics that mould the interaction.

Many foreign-born interviewees described the limited sociability among the Finns. This is explained as a common national trait in business-oriented guidebooks (for example Lewis 2005). Some interviewees, particularly in high tech environments, found the low sociability and high task orientation among the Finns upsetting. This was for example reflected in discussions on greeting:

> It was for me culture shock, like sometimes Finnish people cannot say even "Hello." If he is working like near to me or like quite close or somehow. (…) The problem that some Finnish people cannot say [hello] even if he or she notices you or is looking for you. (…) Actually, I felt that it's because I'm foreign. But after some discussion with other Finnish people (…), actually it's [i.e. greeting] not maybe very good even among Finnish people.

In particular, those who came from visible minorities or from Russia, which is relatively low in the ethnic hierarchy in Finland (Jaakkola 2009), first interpreted this limited sociality as a reaction to themselves as foreigners. It took some time to learn that it was a common social limitation among people in the country, also complained about by locals themselves. These comments were particularly common among foreign born employees

in the high tech environment and less common among workers in the metal industries.

Pablo, who originated in southern Europe and had worked also in other countries, wondered why a person with whom he had been sharing the same office for one and half years still evaded him, despite his own attempts to greet the guy. Anton from Britain in turn complained that locals do not want to keep up with their networks after projects had finished but have a very instrumental approach to interaction: when there was no more direct use of the relationship for work assignments, the social interaction or interest in the other person evaporated altogether:

> *If I'm working with somebody that I haven't met before, (…) on a common project, whatever it might be, fine, no problem. And then everything finishes, okay, our work finishes and then we go back to doing our own work again… (…), and then I meet them again at the coffee machine and it's, "Hi, how are you, how is it going" [mentioned in Finnish], and then about a week later it's "Hello" [in Finnish]. It's like it erodes, it's like something changes, something's happened, I don't know. And then six months later it's like this... it's like somebody's pulled the plug, it's like the water ran out or something...*

A feature that is identified as a national characteristic in both arenas – limited social interaction and taciturnity – is experienced somewhat differently in the two arenas. In the metal industries it is not seen as affecting efficiency; quite the opposite. However, in the high tech environment it is considered to be a cause of common concern that inevitably slows down working processes and feelings of job satisfaction in a transnational work team.

Pragmatism linked with Finnish national characteristics was identified by many high tech interviewees as being well suited to the general ethos of a global high tech arena. As such, the national environment was thus highly congruent with the "engineering mindset". However, in practice, the pragmatism led to an anaemic sociality that became an impediment to working efficiently at teamwork. In the metal industries, the picture of Finnish sociality was different. The number one Finnish national characteristic was considered to be the workaholic approach, not anaemic sociality or pragmatism. Importantly, quality of work in high-tech sector is frequently based on mutual interaction and learning and therefore limited social interaction is not only an impediment to creating a community, but also may be a hindrance to fulfilling work assignments to the best.

One explanation of the differing stresses on social interaction as a feature of Finnish working environments comes evidently from the differing social backgrounds of the employees in these two arenas. In the metal industries, employees' backgrounds were mostly working class and the workers were relatively less well educated, while the experts in the high tech arena, especially the foreign-born ones, came from middle or higher social class backgrounds. The role of formal social interaction and decorum is different in middle class and working class environments, no matter what the national milieu is (cf. Elias 1969).

Hierarchies and their absence

One aspect of the protean nature of career development in the global high tech work environment has been the lessening of hierarchies compared to the traditional local–national work environments such as those in metal industries. Interviewees in both arenas stressed that in Finland hierarchies are less steep than elsewhere – in Hofstede's (1980) vocabulary, Finnish management tends to be of low power distance. This can be regarded as a typical Finnish social condition that derives from relatively narrow class differences in a traditionally peasant society that has experienced a very fast industrialization and post-industrialization process since the 1960s. Maurice, an ICT expert, described this as follows:

> *The hierarchy is also, there's less hierarchy in Finland. It's very flat. If I want to go and see my boss, I just go and see by boss. I call him by his first name. In France it's, I have to go through many people before I reach the boss and I have to wait and [say] "Sir, excuse me sir".*

The flat hierarchy typical of high tech environments appears even flatter in the Finnish environment where in the national mainstream culture people are not in the habit of manifesting hierarchical differences by the use of particular linguistic markers that are, for example, common in many Central European languages. Low hierarchy and pragmatism are interpreted as typically Finnish characteristics that benefit intercultural communication in ICT and give the Finnish working environment an edge in global competition, although adjusting to such low hierarchies predisposed some foreign-born interviewees to learn new interactive ways.

It is usual in Finnish work organizations to expect employees to take individual responsibility for their tasks and to work without constant supervision (Raunio and Forsander 2009). However, managing expert organizations is challenging and the manager should be able to observe accurately when to intervene and when to leave the experts to use their own initiative and innovativeness (Forsander and Raunio 2005; Trompenaars-Hampden 1998). Evidently some Finnish members of work communities have interpreted the manager-dependent style of working of some foreign-born employees as work evasion and even laziness. This difference was vividly explained by Johannes, who had studied in another European country and had worked for a few months as a commissioned worker in India. Now, he works as the team leader of a multinational work group:

> *It is really the kind of evasion of responsibility, that mentality, if the foreign worker is not sure how to do something, then he simply does not do it… If it goes wrong, you can always blame the instructions or the Finnish guy. It is that fear of losing one's face and the like, they just don't dare to do things. Due to that you really lose your temper quite often during a project. For example, if we are failing a deadline, you don't get any answer why. Or it is all turned upside down, like it's the fault of the Finnish side.*

Johannes also realized that in Finnish working environments social interaction is less intensive. He added that "*of course certain kind of sociality always helps in a work place*", but did not think that it was as central as the ability to be responsible and independent.

Unlike the high tech experts, interviewees in the metal industries did not pay any particular attention to team leadership, management or hierarchies in the work place. When asked about the interaction between foremen and foreign-born workers, it was explained that these relations did not differ from those between co-nationals.[4] This may be due to the fact that hierarchical relations between foremen and workers in metal industries are relatively more similar in Finland to those in many other European countries, and consequently they corresponded more to the expectations of the migrant workers than in the high tech field.

Information flows

The observed features of the Finnish communicative practice, that is, of being relatively blunt and very fact-oriented, may appear to be efficient and down to earth. However, these features may slow down smooth flow of information in work organizations and have adverse effects in the long run. Pablo, who worked in a high tech expert organization, explained:

> *… sometimes, if I know that something is important to another person, I will go and tell him even if I'm not asked. But people don't do it here, and these problems of communication sometimes they, they, I mean they make your work go more slowly and you know and of course it's not…it's also not nice, but it has some kind of negative consequences in work.*

According to the foreign-born interviewees' opinion, Finns in expert organizations are not only reluctant to ask about something they do not know, they also do not tell others even if they realize that they lack some information that might be useful. Shiva, who originated in South Asia, regretted that in conversation people only cover the essential part and leave all else out, even if they know that they possess additional information that is potentially useful to you:

> *If they [the Finns] want to say something, they will definitely say it. If they don't say anything, they will not say anything. If there is something wrong or they did not understand, sometimes they don't understand, and then they don't even ask. I'm quite sure that if they did not understand, but still, they would not ask!*

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4   This may partly reflect the fact that it is difficult for interviewees to give negative feedback on their foremen in an interview that is carried out in the workplace and by an ethnic Finn.

This reluctance to provide information, to ask and instruct, and to give negative feedback can be interpreted as a manifestation of high uncertainty avoidance in Hofstede's (1980) schema. However, this term does not fully convey what is important about the issue here: the relationship of information and conflict avoidance, not the attitude towards rules and regulations. The ability and willingness to ask is a highly culturally-specific issue, affected by a number of intervening factors (Volkema 2012).

The interviewees in the metal industries conveyed a much more benign image of the flow of information in their working environments. Although the foreign-born workers rarely had any out-of-hours social contacts with their fellow workers of Finnish origin, they were satisfied with the information and advice they got from their colleagues at work. A metal worker from Estonia, Raivo, trusted the help he received from his fellows:

> Yes, I speak and mates help and give good hints and that's normal. I guess that it's a good collective there, a good bunch of people. (…) And there are the girls in the office, if you ask, they are not stuffy, they answer you and help. If you are yourself not stuffy, you are like a human being [to them].

Not a single metalworker complained of not receiving help or advice if he asked for it. One told about a considerate foreman who had been central to his success. One foreman who was interviewed became conscious of his role in helping the foreign-born workers in the workplace only during the interview. He thought he might actually be helping the workers by, for example, giving a hand in filling in their tax statements, something he would never do with a Finnish metalworker. He had also invented new ways of making use of the calendar to ascertain that the foreign-born workers understood his message correctly.

A metalworker from South East Asia, Jose's story reveals the importance of having a committed, practical guide for learning the occupation. He had come to Finland as an unskilled worker after his marriage to a woman of his country who resided in Finland. A small firm had employed him to learn the occupation of a tinsmith. The owner of the firm had a positive belief in his potential and he asked a senior Finnish tinsmith to act as his tutor. The older man knew no English so the only language they could speak to each other in the beginning was sign language. Jose picked up Finnish quickly. Now he was able to work independently without guidance.

Feedback and learning

Jose was a good example of intercultural learning by doing: important explanations for his success were his learning ability, motivation, supportive management and having a patient instructor. Both Jose's and Raivo's situations show how mutual intercultural learning in the metal industries is not difficult, providing that both sides are able to cross the initial threshold and get involved with each other.

One important feature that the foreign-born interviewees had a lot to say about as a particular Finnish trait was abstaining from giving feedback. Giving and receiving feedback is a mutual process of learning that is affected by cultural context (Morrison et al. 2004). This proved to be a relatively difficult field of learning in both arenas examined, and there were also certain considerations of national character involved in people's understanding of the difficulties of giving and receiving feedback. When employees have greater access to information about behaviours that are acceptable and desired at work and the feedback environment is of high quality and supportive of feedback seeking, then, work role clarity, work outcomes and job satisfaction are enhanced (Rosen et al. 2006; Whitaker et al. 2007).

Finnish interviewees commonly considered giving early feedback to a co-worker as intrusive and thus undesirable. Consequently, Finns in both the metal industries and the high tech arena tended to consider it best to avoid giving a colleague, whether co-ethnic or foreign born, early feedback; they preferred to complain to the foreman or team leader instead of directly addressing a co-worker. This is manifest in the comment of a Finnish metal worker: "*Different strokes for different folks. I have the kind of principle that I don't poke into other people's business if it does not touch on my life, I overlook it*".

This type of reaction was evident, for example, in one case in the metal industries, where a foreign-born employee had picked up a habit of using the office telephone to make frequent, long and noisy international calls to his home country, which not only irritated but also disturbed the office staff. However, no one dared to tell the caller to stop this unauthorized practice. Finally, after several weeks of annoyance someone complained to the manager, which had serious consequences for the employee who had to compensate for the expensive calls. In such a situation, many Finns considered that complaining directly to the boss was preferable to directly intervening in the rights and wrongs of a colleague's affairs. A foreman in a metal workshop explained:

> *I have told all our employees that they should come to tell me. Do not tell the other worker directly, it is better to tell me first, if you are pissed off by a person. If they start arguing or fighting with each other, it will lead to problems. We settle the issue and we talk the things over. In that way we avoid arguments and they can work in peace.*

From the perspective of any worker, and even more so for foreign-born workers, the feedback environment described above is dysfunctional. Foreign-born workers may have relatively harmless habits and practices of work performance or general behaviour that distinguish them from the others. If they are kept unaware that a certain practice is undesirable or unacceptable in the work place, foreign-born workers may continue with the practice until the situation becomes harmful for their social relations or work performance. This process may escalate from a minor issue into larger problem and feed the negative stereotypes of both migrant and native-born workers. By abstaining from

taking the issue up in order to save the migrant's face, the Finnish co-workers or management may end up humiliating the migrant worker, paradoxically leading finally to their loss of face. Aleksei, who originated from Russia and worked in a high tech research environment, commented,

> *Every time you do not get feedback. When you are dealing with Finns, it is clear to me, there will be no feedback. If I happen to do something wrong, nobody tells me that I'm doing it wrong. They just keep it in their mind and I go on doing the wrong thing. And every time I feel that someone is criticizing me in their mind but does not say it out loud... But in Russia it is different, in Russia they give feedback, they say something or the like.*

This lack of feedback from co-workers or management was mentioned by interviewees of many different ethnic and national backgrounds. Finnish Mauno, working in the high tech arena, had realized this feature when working in different international contexts:

> *One of the poor features of Finns is that in a way they don't give any criticism. It is more a kind of casting sullen glances at others that you realize only afterwards. And if they give feedback, it can be that a Finn does not know how to give it, he or she easily just blurts it out. So giving feedback is one of the things we really should learn. I don't know if it works so awfully well everywhere else either, but at least here it does not work.*

The global, intercultural arena requires more intensive feedback than is necessary in the metal industries. This reflects both the role of the hierarchy and teamwork, and the role of sociality in completing tasks. The alleged lack of feedback may be a serious hindrance to the completion of work assignments in the high tech environment, while in the metal industries such a hindrance is less evident and less commonly reported.

Conclusion

Actual cultural identifications are becoming increasingly hybrid, variable, changing and politically laden, requiring new forms of transcultural competence that are built on a non-essentialist notion of culture (Koehn and Rosenau 2010; Otten and Geppert 2009; Witte 2012). Particularly in the field of globalizing economic activity, national cultural characterizations appear nowadays to be passé and transgressed by others, often messy, less well organized, and less categorical in their processes and identifications. The increasingly fluid and negotiable cultural boundaries nevertheless collide with the social reality of a surprisingly resilient tendency among workers to use national cultural characterisation as a means of understanding the social realities of the workplace. Behind an explicit belief in the irrelevance of national background and the celebration of indi-

viduality and choice, national stereotypes are alive, even in global arenas. Even though high tech is fundamentally global, people in working environments often tend to utilize rather stereotypical imagery of national characteristics in identifying others – and sometimes themselves – irrespective of their often politically correct statements on transnationalism, multiculturalism and globalism. However, the contents of such stereotypes are not static, but they are affected by the prerequisites of the arena. National characterizations remain a frame of reference for social categorization in transcultural workplaces, but the ways this conceptual tool is used and given meaning are highly context-specific.

The relational position of the institutional environment vis-à-vis the local–global continuum shows in the ways the local or national work ethos is interpreted. Are the Finns seen as workaholic, as leisure oriented, lacking in social skills, pragmatic to the bone, back-biting, helpful, or tolerant? There is a pattern in the Finnish ways of working that reflects the importance of global connectedness and intercultural learning. In the locally and nationally moored metal industries, the features that are stressed as Finnish relate to the strong work ethic as reflected in a cult of work, while in the globally moored arena of high tech the Finnishness that is valued is factuality, expert orientation, pragmatism and individual responsibility. Flat hierarchies are considered in the high tech arena to be a Finnish characteristic, while in the metal workshops this feature does not appear to be reported on by the foreign-born or Finnish workers. The importance of keeping and saving face was commented on as a Finnish trait in both of the arenas, which is considered particularly harmful for the globally oriented high tech environment where information flows and constant feedback are essential for expert tasks.

As soon as language barriers are eased and equal working conditions for all workers are guaranteed, interaction between the locally-born and foreign-born workforce in the metal industries was felt to work relatively smoothly. This is somewhat surprising, given that the less well educated tend to be more xenophobic (Jaakkola 2009). In the high tech field, on the other hand, communicative challenges are thought to be relatively insignificant due to the use of English as the medium of interaction and the global character of the arena; however, underneath the smooth surface, communication seems to be plagued by dissatisfaction and unexpected communicative problems (see also Trux 2010). Transcultural competence and learning has a much more critical role in teamwork in the globally-based high tech environment than in more traditional metal industries.

Some studies have pointed out that it is essential to study differences in values and work cultures in organizational, occupational or gender terms, rather than as national, cultural differences (Gerhart and Fang 2005; Van Maanen and Barley 1982). By bringing the concept of arena into the analysis of cultural differences, we do not only aim to add another relevant unit of analysis to the list of factors affecting management or working ethos. Rather, we aim to point out that national culture, insofar as it is relevant to work, should be understood in the light of the structural position of the arena in the global–local continuum and as a construction made meaningful by the actors. The re-

lationship between the arena and the local, national, transnational or global terrain of action is crucially reflected in the ways national characteristics are interpreted in the here-and-now of sites of work. If we are to understand how national stereotypes are made to work, it is the first task of the analysts to contemplate the relationship of the arena vis-à-vis the continuum between locality and globality. In terms of policy design results call much more deliberate efforts to integrate immigration related and cross-cultural policy tools to different policy frames rather than pursue to create separated immigration or multicultural policies on their own.

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