



Immigrant Integration and Intercultural Communication Practices of Social Welfare Professionals in Finland

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The effects of globalization have rearranged modern societies' economic, legal, social, and political structures. Immigration, for instance, has urged nations to adapt and promote integration, inclusion, participation, and independence of the immigrants settling in the new country. At the core of this task, social welfare professionals are faced with the challenge to acquire or enhance their intercultural competencies to provide culturally sensitive services that involve, at their core, constant communication.

The aim of this thesis was to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland. As objectives, it sought to explore social welfare professionals' experiences and challenges in intercultural communication practices in the context of immigrant integration in Finland. Its secondary objective was to study intercultural communication in the process of immigrant integration in the country. It was produced intending for it to become a framework for professionals and institutions in the integration field, to identify positive experiences and address challenges in intercultural communication practices in an increasingly multicultural Finland.

A qualitative research method was used, and data were collected by individual, unstructured interviews with three social welfare professionals in Finland, who work in the immigrant integration field. The literature search supported the construction of a theoretical framework on the main topics addressed and used as background for this study, including cultural competence and social work, intercultural communication, and immigrant integration in Finland.

The thematic analysis of the data identified six main themes: (1) the advantage of sharing cultural identity or background with the service user, (2) the relevance of informing immigrants about the Finnish integration system, (3) the impact of the fragile mental health condition of the service users on intercultural communication, (4) professional approach to intercultural communication, (5) self-evaluation of professional performance (a: when starting in the field /b: after acquiring experience in the field, and (6) the importance of establishing trust between professionals and service user.

This thesis provides a description of Finnish social welfare professionals' experiences and associated challenges when practicing intercultural communication in the field of immigrant integration. The results reflect the professionals' range of culturally sensitive approaches when practicing intercultural communication. The author recommends that multicultural training and education be a formal and regular occurrence in Finland, along with cross-sectoral cooperation and immigrant participation in the decision-making process of the services provided for them.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, cultural competence, social work, immigrant integration, thematic analysis

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1 Introduction

The globalization of capitalism modified the contemporary world's dynamic. Its effects altered how societies structured their market, services, and policies and fomented the surge of a phenomenon that has seen migrant populations pursuing new, better, and safer opportunities to live, to work, and to prosper (Tacoli & Ocali 2001). 2015 was booked in history as a record year in the numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe, the majority fleeing conflict-torn middle east countries (Spindler 2015). The year witnessed European nations' struggle and effort in coping with the immigration surge and in recognizing immigration issues as a priority in the world's policy agenda (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2021).

As a result of the intense migration to the country in that year, the debate of multicultural competence in the practice of social workers gained relevance in Finland in 2015. The phenomenon raised concerns about how social work education and practices could answer to the needs and challenges of an increasingly multicultural population and the intercultural interaction practices the new context would demand. Due to its novelty, the movement towards achieving proficiency in that field remains under development, and developing workers' intercultural skills hasn't become a relevant topic in Finnish social work education institutions. Additionally, Finnish social work practices are aligned to the principles of universalism, being therefore, developed to attend to local challenges and lacking to address differences and diversity. (Translation from Metteri, Forsman, Heinonen & Laakso 2016, 27.)

In 2019, Finland received almost 33 thousand immigrants, and at the end of that year, statistics registered 423,494 persons with foreign backgrounds living in Finland (Statista 2021; Statistics Finland 2020). In parallel, The Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2021a) claims that efforts on immigrant integration have increased in the country's agenda in recent years. The country's Institute for Health and Welfare advocates for the inclusion, participation, and integration of those living in Finland, through the access to services and participation in daily activities, such as work, housing, education, hobbies, income, and health (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021a).

A successful integration process has been proven to be beneficial not only for the individual but "at the aggregate country level as well" (Danzer 2011). For that purpose, adequate intercultural communication practice is essential when working with culturally different individuals and communities. Therefore, this thesis aspires to describe the intercultural communication experiences and associated challenges related to immigrant integration from the perspective of social welfare professionals in Finland, intending to contribute to the

broad discussion of intercultural communication in social work and to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Cultural Competence and social work

Avidly discussed within cross-cultural, intercultural and diversity studies, cultural competence's meaning, importance and application have been conveyed to a degree of utmost importance in the current times. In what Horevitz, Lawson and Chow (2013) classified as multiple terms depicting a similar or identical construct, the inclusion of terms e.g., cultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural sensitivity, often concerning the same concept, add a layer of complexity when attempting to define cultural competence.

Nevertheless, the term has been mostly identified as a strategy for training and an approach for delivering culturally sensitive service (Danso 2016). And as a collection of systematic acts that facilitate the delivery of effective work in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Brazron, Dennis & Isaacs 1989). Those practices, or "new patterns of behavior", when appropriately performed, configures competence adequate to improve intervention strategies when provided, for instance, to minority groups (National Association of Social Workers 2015, 13).

Cross et al. (1989) also point that effective cultural competency reflects the agents' acceptance and respect for difference, the perpetual expansion of their cultural knowledge, the effort to give voice and meet the needs of minorities, among other traits. Commonly, the largely accepted cultural competence concepts "emphasize the need to question one's assumptions, beliefs, and biases, and understanding how these views differ from those of other people" (Danso 2016, 6).

However, despite being essentially associated with a positive and relevant connotation, cultural competence has faced criticism. According to Danso (2016), it might happen due to wrongful conceptualization, e.g., when cultural competence was conveyed as an effortless interaction between cultures, reducing its application to simply broadening one's view and skills by learning the history and characteristics of another culture. Similar to Horevitz et al. (2013), Danso (2016) refers to the multitude of terms within the same construct and the misconception that cultural competency alone could fix all the cultural conflicts emanating from globalized societies, as another possible contribution to the misinterpretations and misunderstanding of the divergent theories.

In this thesis, in tandem with Cross et al. (1989) and Danso's (2016) interpretation, cultural competence will be addressed as a developing process that requires getting rid of ethnocentric views, demands respecting differences, and enables better communication between agents coming from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, as an asset and crucial skill for any professional working in the globalized world, aiming at delivering culturally sensitive services embedded in ethical practices.

The 1982 Finnish Social Welfare Act classifies social work as the act of "guidance, counselling and investigation of social problems by professional social welfare staff and other support measures", aiming to "maintain and promote the security of individuals and families, their ability to cope and the functionality of communities". (Finland 1982.)

The social work profession, whose practice must be aligned with the social dynamic, stands on an assortment of principles that includes, among others, the promotion of social justice and the respect of diversity. Regarding the latter, the International Federation of Social Workers, on its Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, reiterates the professionals' commitment to strengthen "inclusive communities that respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of societies, taking account of individual, family, group, and community differences". (International Federations of Social Workers 2018.)

Finnish statistics accounted for 204,758 professionals working in the social welfare field in 2014 in Finland, and while earlier data hasn't been released, the 2014 figure promotes an estimate of how large is the number of professionals involved in the provision of social services currently in the country (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021b).

Being sensitive to and mindful of cultural and ethnic diversity is part of the ethos of the social work profession. For instance, it is mentioned as a social work professional value and ethical standards by the North American National Association of Social Workers. The Association's revised code of ethics reserves sections to discuss cultural competence in a diverse society and describes the importance of professionals understanding culture and its effect in the individual and collective sphere. (National Association of Social Workers 2008.)

Likewise, the document highlights the importance of recognizing the strength in every culture of providing adequate service to culturally diverse people and groups, being aware of the nature of social diversity and, working to promote policies and practices that seek to combat oppression related to color, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, immigration status, race, etc. (National Association of Social Workers 2008).

For that purpose, the cultural self-assessment, proposed by Cross et al. (1989) as one of the elements of a culturally competent agent, presents the opportunity to examine, for instance,

the dynamics of power present in cultural exchanges. As for social workers, evaluating their culture would keep personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices from affecting the interaction and the service provided to a client coming from a different cultural background. In professional practice, combining self-awareness and cultural knowledge (client's cultural traditions, history, norms, and communication style) is crucial to practice culturally sensitive interventions (Nadan 2014).

As communally recognized, becoming culturally competent is not a simple task. Cross et al. (1989) regarded it as an ongoing developmental process that requires deconstruction and involves commitment and discipline. Professionals in their practices will face challenges that will demand recognizing and overcoming their limitations and those of the system they work for.

Facing those challenges involves learning to separate the individual from the groups (Johnson & Munch 2009), understanding that studying cultures can still lead to stereotyping and, that a culturally sensitive service observes strength while rejecting and fighting cultural practices that perpetuate oppression and violate human rights and dignity. It also involves challenging "systematic inequalities", institutional and structural oppression, and privilege (Carpenter 2016, 6; National Association of Social Workers 2015).

2.2 Social worker and social service professional in Finland

The social welfare professionals' regulation in Finland follows a particular logic. Social workers and social service professionals are separated from an educational path that determines the professional titles, job positions, line of action, and earnings of the two distinct professions licensed to work on the social welfare system. To illustrate, social workers are individuals whose qualifications will come from obtaining a degree in a higher education institution (University) in a social work or social science program from where the student is granted the title of Bachelor of Social Work, or social science, and can act as a social worker. The program normally lasts 3 years and for the degree, the student must have completed "major subject studies or university studies in social work corresponding to the major subject". (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2005.)

The social work programs in Finnish universities focus on producing scientific research and provide the opportunity to, adding two more years of specialization, complete a master's degree without requiring the applicant to have working experience in the area. After completing the program, one is granted the title of Master of social work, or social science, and can act and lead projects as a social worker in private and public organizations, at the federal or municipal levels, working directly with clients and communities or in

administration level planning e.g., policies in the social welfare area. (Translated from University of Eastern Finland 2019.)

Social services professionals, in turn, are the professionals who graduated from a Bachelor of Social Service degree program from a polytechnic (university of applied sciences) institution. The program usually lasts 3,5 years, may be structured as a jointed social service and healthcare curriculum, and will grant individuals the title of Bachelor of Social Service. Master program in social service is also offered in polytechnic institutions, require between 1,5 to 2,5 years of studying, focus on the working life and developing the practical application of the professional skills and demands a minimum of 2 years of working experience of its candidate. In Finland, the program is often attached to the health care field, and completing the course will grant one the title of Master of Social service and/or Master of health care. (Translated from University of Eastern Finland 2019.)

As a professional, a social service degree holder is not allowed by law to carry the title of social worker (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2005). Instead, they work as social instructors or counselors and can act in child welfare positions, as family and youth worker, as well as a manager and supervisor.

Explaining this distinction is important for this thesis considering that the interviews conducted for its construction were carried out in Finland, where utilizing exclusively the term social worker would disregard a range of professionals who are essential in completing immigrant integration efforts. Therefore, intending to contemplate the experiences of social workers, social counselors, and instructors, this thesis uses the term *social welfare professionals* in its title and on every occasion that otherwise only the term *social workers* would be mentioned.

2.3 Intercultural communication

As an aftermath of the wave of scientific, technological, and economic development that stroke the last decades of the twentieth century, globalization and its technological advancements intensified the migration phenomenon and upgraded diversity as one of the quintessences of the global world. On this background, “social workers, psychologists, healthcare professionals, counselors, teachers and employment officers are confronted with and forced to cope with new challenges that a multicultural context de facto brings about” (Stier 2004). Among those challenges, is the intercultural communication practice.

Intercultural communication refers to the notion that distinct forms of culture and communication have intersected in time, space, and context (Patel, Li & Sooknanan 2011, 15). It occurs, according to Baldwin, Coleman, Gonzáles & Shenoy-Packer (2014,5) “when

culture impacts the communication between two or more people enough to make a difference". It can be studied as a particular phenomenon related to communication activities involving agents from a culturally different background (Cheng 2017). According to Hua (2016, 22), it encompasses the study of interactions between culturally different people, cross-cultural communication patterns, and negotiation of cultural differences.

Considering that an individual's communication practices are a product of their culture and that they "communicate their cultures along with the message" Patel et al. (2011,17), the complex nature of this association is a source of issues that arise during an intercultural communication event. In that sense, Patel et al. (2011,16) illustrate that, when culture and communication intersect, what one individual says merges with whom that person is, shifting the focus from the content of the message (the actual information) to the cultural identity of the individual and its social customs.

Patel et al. (2011,17) provide a brief list of reasons from which issues may arise regarding interpreting the messages delivered in an intercultural communication event. They involve, for instance, "not recognizing the uniqueness of the individual, not focusing on the message, and making judgements from the perspective of one's own culture."

Cheng (2017, 4) reveals elements that are central to the research of intercultural communication. In particular, the relationship between culture and communication and the process of creating meaning, making sense, interpreting messages, and producing outcomes. Those elements may differ in each culture and affect intercultural communication and those who practice it. Practicing effective intercultural communication encompasses fighting elements that interfere in the communicator's performance. "Barriers such as cultural stereotype and prejudice, identity conflict, language deficiency, and the lack of interaction skills" can be overcome by achieving intercultural communication competence, a fundamental capacity for professionals interacting in the deeply connected and interdependent world (Dai & Chen 2014, 1).

2.4 Intercultural communication and social work

Communication is a crucial part of the social work profession. Individually or in a group, and on different phases of the service provided, communication makes up a large part of social workers practices, which Farukuzzaman & Rahman (2019, 36) refers to as "the practice of helping people use their social environment to meet their needs and solve their problems".

An essential feature of the social work practice is problem-solving. It involves analyzing situations, considering needs, and identifying solutions. The participation of the service user

in each step of that process is valued as crucial and demands of the professional the skills to communicate and interact, and to create a positive relationship that allows clients to express their concerns and needs. Some of the purposes of communication in the social work interaction are related to gathering information, expressing and “exploring ideas, feelings and possible ways to meet and solve problems”, and “Informing, advising, encouraging, and giving necessary directions”. (Farukuzzaman & Rahman 2019, 39.)

Effective communication with service users is also beneficial in providing a better understanding of verbal and non-verbal behavior, in establishing a healthy and professional relationship, for enhancing client’s motivation and identifying their strengths, to understand emotions and feelings, in the process of collecting service user’s information, and in developing a two-way communication process (Farukuzzaman & Rahman 2019, 39,41).

In a multicultural society, the new professional challenges amount to those common in a non-diverse environment. Professionals working with a multicultural population will meet service users speaking different languages, having mental health issues and who have experienced discrimination and racism. (Bø 2015, 562.) A survey conducted with 50 social workers working with service users from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities, presented the five main issues seen by the professionals as major challenges of working with a culturally diverse population:

- Communication problems caused by the lack of a common language.
- Communication problems caused by different codes of behavior, in interactions with professional services.
- Cultural differences in parent-child relations.
- Health problems without adequate medical help available.
- Structural barriers which made it difficult to adapt the social service system to the needs of the minority clients. (Bø 2015, 563.)

Among a set of knowledge and competencies required by those professionals working in a pluralist society, the ability to communicate “across cultural and linguistic divisions” and to acquire “new openness and greater sensitivity to other value orientations” is a relevant skill to respond to those challenges (Bø 2015, 572). Understanding that communication is at the core of the profession, it is not uncommon that client and professional’s different “culture, personality, experiences, expectations, needs, and ambitions, respectively, play significant roles in their mutual relationship and interaction” (Stier 2004, 6).

Those differences, however, must not be interpreted as a division that separates culturally different individuals as better, worse, stronger, weaker, deserving. Instead, they represent culturally specific particularities that translate into specific “needs, ideals, ambitions and reaction patterns”. It is part of the social worker duty to identify those peculiarities and provide a service that fits the individual’s specific need while avoiding assuming that cultural

peculiarities can “explain things which in fact are expressions of something all-human or, by contrast, something highly individual”. (Stier 2004, 14.)

Developing and improving one’s intercultural communication competence requires, among other steps, critically analyzing one’s bias and beliefs, the power dynamic in the relationship with service users, and respecting the integrity and cultural history of each individual. To effectively communicate with people from a certain culture, one must first comprehend its belief systems, values, and how that culture understands its environment. The movement to become culturally competent is a valuable, ongoing process prone to become ever more necessary as the world’s geographical and technological barriers shrinks and societies struggle to accommodate newcomers. (Patel et al. 2011,19.)

2.5 Cultural diversity and immigrant integration

Culture is not static. It is continuously influenced by societal developments that affect a group’s attitudes, customs, and beliefs. People, similarly, also need to adapt to those changes. That the case of migrant populations. Those groups, while preserving a great part of the features of their culture, must adapt to the values and ideals of the dominant culture in the new society they become part of. An adaptative process named acculturation. (Patel et al. 2011, 18.)

Considering that the values and beliefs of an individual or cultural group determine how they perceive the world and communicate with other groups and individuals, it is possible to understand why “individuals and groups from different cultures are accustomed to making judgments on the actions of other cultures based on their own belief and value systems” (Patel et al. 2011, 19). This observation demonstrates why, in the process of integration, it is imperial that nations support and defend diversity.

While formerly sustaining a menacing connotation and being discouraged by public policies for posing a threat to one nation’s stability, the current stance of western nations regarding cultural diversity has gained a more positive approach. A position that is reflected in the common endorsement of multicultural public policies aiming at immigrant integration. Those policies, guarantee civil and political rights while supporting and recognizing ethnocultural minorities identities and practices. (Banting & Kymlickz 2003, 2.)

Public administration’s increasing concern towards integration must not be detached from the support of cultural diversity, and it needs to be translated and implemented into public policies and services. Cultivating a positive attitude towards cultural diversity is, to Patel et al. (2011, 53), a fundamental element of intercultural competence. Services that

accommodate cultural diversity grants its users the “right to their cultural selves in the wider society” (Käkelä 2019, 21).

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare campaigns for social inclusion of immigrants, ratifying that the institute promotes the wellbeing of immigrants and reduces exclusion and inequality. According to the institute, discrimination obstructs immigrant integration, inclusion, and equality. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021c.)

Algan, Bisin, Mannig & Verdier (2012) point that social and cultural interactions are essential and determinant to the social-economic integration of immigrants, and can affect their daily-life performances. UNESCO points that cultural diversity forms a democratic framework for inclusion, solidarity, and participation by all citizens. It enables a more equal range of opportunities and it’s a means to “achieve more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence”. (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2002.)

2.6 Immigrant integration in Finland

Parallel to the global scenario of intense migration, in 2015 the Finnish government had been preparing for its health and social care reform. It configured a moment of important structural change for the Finnish welfare system that would also affect how the country deals with integrating the newcomers. (Tuomisto, Tiittala, Keskimäki & Helve 2019, 825.)

Integrating an individual into a new society’s political, economic, cultural, and social sphere is, as stated by the Finnish Centre of Expertise in Immigrant Integration, a multidisciplinary function. It requires the involvement of government authorities, in an elaborated level of collaboration between its different branches and levels of administration, with the cooperation of civil society actors. Local integration procedures are organized by the municipal Centers for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment no 2021a.) The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, in turn, is the national agency responsible for integrating immigrants. It coordinates “integration legislation and the promotion of employment among immigrants”. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021b.)

Besides the measures included in the official agencies’ agenda, the often-lengthy integration process occurs in the community life: at school, in the parks, churches, sports centers, with neighbors, at work, among others. For that reason, the immigrant must be prepared for and given the opportunity and the right to be introduced, trained, and accepted in those spaces, and to feel comfortable to occupy them. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

2021b.) For that purpose, the Finnish government, in advocating for diversity, classifies as indispensable a non-discrimination and cooperation approach. The 2011 Finnish Integration Act specifies that:

Inclusion and good ethnic relations are important for society and its general security and stability. Immigrants' participation in civic activities and increasing dialogue between population groups are cross-cutting objectives of both the Integration Act and the Government Integration Programme. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021c.)

Such a stance aligns with the main political debate regarding immigration integration occurring in most western countries. Within the integration discussion, cultural diversity, cultural identity, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity present the most pressing challenges faced by European societies (Algan et al. 2012).

The 2018 Welcome to Finland guide, states that to obtain the needed skills for integration, it is crucial to “learning the language, finding a job or student position and forming contacts within Finnish society” (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018, 15). Services are offered by the government to all immigrants, regardless of the type of immigration, to facilitate those steps. The services include an initial assessment to collect personal information, the preparation of an integration plan, and integration training (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018, 15-18).

Acknowledging the possible confusion with the numerous processes one needs to be aware of and partake in, advisors are available at the municipalities and the Employment and Economic Development Offices (Työ- ja elinkeinotoimisto) for more detailed information regarding those steps. If confirmed necessary, incoming support and unemployment benefit are provided during the integration plan. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018.)

A society that promotes and ensures social, economic, political, and cultural integration of its foreign individuals allows cultural differences to enrich its thread. An outlook contrary to previous conception of integration (Banting & Kymlickz 2003, 2). Economically, integration has also been proved to be beneficial. Finnish integration plan reportedly considerably increased employment rates and annual earnings, thus reducing welfare dependency (Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen 2010).

Finally, it seems relevant to reiterate that integration cannot be reduced to responses such as facilitating a job or being culturally tolerant. Several issues need to be addressed concerning cultural minority integration to produce a meaningful response, and to promote legitimate structural change. Civil and human rights must be recognized and assured and access to opportunities needs safeguarding. It is essential to respect cultural differences and the

freedom to express them, and it is imperial to showcase minority's voice and consider their needs in public matters such as policies. (National Association of Social Workers 2008.)

3 Aim, objectives and research question

This research aims to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland. As objectives, it seeks to:

- Describe intercultural communication in the process of immigrant integration in Finland.
- Explore social welfare professionals' experiences and challenges in intercultural communication practices in the context of immigrant integration.

The research question is:

What are the experiences and challenges faced by social services professionals in Finland, who work with immigration integration, when practicing intercultural communication?

4 Approach

4.1 Methodology

This thesis is qualitative research. Qualitative research encompasses numerous methods, genres, elements, and styles, and is a way to study social life by collecting information and data through textual and visual material that documents "human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states" (Saldana 2011, 4, 30). Additionally, it uses individuals' experience as a source of data and seeks to decipher "meanings, representations and perceptions" (Labra, Castro, Wright & Chamblas 2019, 3).

Choosing to use a qualitative method is befitting also of research in the social work field because those approaches can be useful in promoting social justice and against inequalities, which is a premise of the profession. On the subject, qualitative research methods employed in the social work field could promote social change and solve social problems. The analysis and dissemination of collected testimonies, could lead to future research and intervention paths. (Labra et al. 2019, 1.)

This thesis employs interviews as its data collection method, considering that Finnish social welfare workers' personal work experiences are the key to answering the research question. In the context of utilizing interviews as a qualitative research method of data collection, Azungah (2018) affirms that the participants can share their "perspectives about the phenomenon under investigation without the researcher imposing any predetermined concepts and opinions on them".

4.2 Data collection

The thesis was initially developed to be conducted in partnership with one organization acting in the field of immigrant integration in Finland. A change of procedure was necessary, however, considering that gathering data from sources employed in different sectors of the same field would add a beneficial diversity value to the data set.

As a primary data source, individual unstructured interviews were conducted with social welfare professionals working with immigrants in the integration field. Interviews are a commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research. They are considered effective in registering "individual's or group's perspectives, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes, and beliefs about their personal experiences and social world" (Saldana 2011, 32).

In Hua (2016, 208) unstructured interviews are presented as "well-suited for a qualitative, inductive approach which starts with data and allows patterns and tentative hypothesis to emerge from analysis." The content expands to add that it allows for a deeper exploration of a topic and will focus on participants' "thoughts, perceptions and experiences" rather than pre-set questions (Hua 2016, 209). In this thesis, the unstructured interviews were conducted individually, which is more fitting for asking unstructured, open-ended questions than a focus group, which is often utilized to gather participants' views on a subject and stimulate discussion between them (Hua 2016, 209).

Additionally, researchers have confirmed that, when comparing the ability to generate data, logistically, individual interviews require fewer participants per data collection than a focus group. They are also easier and faster to arrange, conduct and transcribe. The same study has also shown that individual interviews are "as effective as, or more effective than, focus groups for generating a list of topics within a domain" (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley & McKenna 2017, 705).

Regarding choosing participants for the interview, Saldana (2011,33) claims that choosing participants considering how they relate to your research questions is an "obvious approach". Therefore, in relation to this study's research question, aims

and objectives, participants selection adopted the following criteria:

- To be a social welfare professional (social worker, social instructor, social counselor)
- To act in any step of the immigrant integration process.
- To be working for more than a year in this field.
- To be aware of the anonymous and voluntary nature of the interview participation.
- To be willing to participate.
- To be aware of the study's purpose and its ethical guidelines.
- To be willing to provide, before the interview date, a signed consent form allowing the interview's content to be used as data for the project.

In the data collection phase of this study, three social welfare professionals were interviewed. Because criteria such as age and gender didn't play any role in selecting participants, the participant search focused on professionals' workplaces, duties, and years of working in this field. Following this criteria, contacting possible interview participants was done via email, after the thesis' author searched online for organizations and institutions who worked in the immigrant integration field in Finland.

The interviewees worked in the public sector and the third sector. They fitted all the earlier-mentioned criteria list and acted in the immigrant integration field in areas ranging from coordinating projects and units to developing services and advocating for the needs of immigrants. They were professionals with years of experience being in contact with people from different cultural backgrounds who used services from the Finnish immigrant integration system.

Ideally, the number of participants expected to be interviewed was between 3 and 7 professionals, in agreement with Saldana (2011, 34) who affirms that "a small group of three to six people provides a broader spectrum of data for analysis". A larger amount would fit better on a questionnaire-led interview as opposed to open-ended questions, which is the chosen format for this study. However, predicting an adequate sample size for qualitative research is not generally possible. For this thesis, such depended on what is mentioned by Malterud, Siersma & Guassora (2015, 1) as *information power*, which is a concept that influences sample sizes and "indicates that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participant is needed". It also depended on topics such as how established is the theory base, the aim of the study, analysis strategy, and sample specificity.

The interviews length varied between 1 and 2 hours. It operated around the topics listed in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1), but the unstructured nature of it made it

possible for the interviewees to discuss freely the themes addressed, which resulted in a rich array of data to be analyzed. Regarding interview preparation, Saldana (2011, 34-35) guides on steps such as contacting participants to negotiate interview details and preparing questions or prompts in advance.

In this respect, reaching out and booking the interview was arranged via email exchange, through which was also possible to send the necessary documents to inform the participants about the thesis. Those who preferred to be interviewed virtually received the Participant Consent Form (Appendix 2) to be signed online via an online signature software and returned it signed before the interview date. Alternatively, a printed form was signed before the interview started, when the meeting happened on a physical location. Covid-19 safety guidelines and schedule availability determined when those meetings were conducted online (via Microsoft Teams) or physically (in participant's workplace meeting room).

Because the interview invitation email contained attached the Participation Information Sheet, candidates were able to make an informed decision on whether to join or not the study, given that the sheet included all the pertinent information regarding the study's aims, goals, data collection, data analysis methods, ethical considerations, the interview topics' list, and their participating rights.

Preparing for the interviews consisted of conducting a literature search and reading the appropriate results related to intercultural communication, immigrant integration, social work, cultural competence, and qualitative research. Additionally, the thesis' aim and objectives served as a base for the topics addressed in the interview. Further probing was expected to arise from the conversation, a common outcome of the freedom of scope possible in unstructured interviews.

A list of topics was constructed as a guide. It was based on the theoretical framework and the research question. Per Saldana's (2011, 35) view, the interview questions are not the same as the research questions but "should derive from them to keep the study grounded". As conveyed by Hua (2016, 214), an interview guide is beneficial even if the researcher is not conducting structured interviews, because it helps the interviewer to further explore the topics to be addressed. It can also lead to a more fruitful discussion as it helps to generate follow-up questions. In this thesis, the list of topics (Appendix 3) was used during the interview to certify no important topic remained unaddressed. Before the interview date, the participants also received via email the preliminary list of interview topics.

Deciding the interview date was done in communication with the participants via email. On the interview day, the most important details concerning the interview and the thesis were discussed, to clarify questions and possible doubts from the participants.

Concerning the use of technology to conduct and record the interviews, Hua (2016, 209) advises to consider factors such as technological proficiency before deciding on using digital technology on interview. In that sense, the interviews were not recorded in video format. Instead, they were audiotaped by a voice recorder device, both when they were conducted personally or online. On that choice, Saldana points that “voice recording most one-person interviews is sufficient for qualitative data collection” (2011, 39).

Before the interview started, participants were reminded of the audio recording, how it would be conducted, and the ethical elements being taken into consideration. Additionally, the use of such a technique was explained in the Participant Information Sheet document they were sent before the interview day. Besides audio recording, notes were taken as the meeting progressed and a research journal was kept and utilized during the interview. The research journal was a tool present in every process of this thesis, used to record thoughts, extracts of relevant theory, project evolution, schedules, and ideas. The notes, journal, and physically signed forms were kept in a safe place accessible only by the thesis author.

4.3 Data analysis

According to Saldana (2011, 89) the data analysis objective is to reveal to others what the researcher has observed and identified about the human condition. When pursuing quality, knowing to analyze the data is just as crucial as having valuable information (Saldana 2011, 63).

The interview transcription followed immediately after they were conducted, to take advantage of the researcher’s recollection of recent events. Hua (2011, 215) lists points to consider when executing a transcription. They relate to, among other factors, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, the use of analytical framework, and the levels of details. Saldana (2011, 45) advises to consider a criteria such as research questions, goals, and researcher experience, to decide whether to transcribe the entire interview or just the most relevant parts of it. In that case, an alternative is to summarize key parts of that portion of the interview since it might become useful later.

However, despite the thesis having clearly outlined research objectives and question, facilitating the identification of relevant excerpts of the interview, it was concluded after further consideration regarding the number of interviews and the level of expertise of the researcher, that a full *verbatim* transcription would be more appropriated. That, to make sure it contains, as pointed by to Braun & Clarke (2006, 17), “the information you need, from the verbal account, and in a way which is true to its original nature”.

After transcription was concluded, the interview data were analyzed by breaking the interview data “into smaller units and coded according to themes or key words” (Hua 2016, 217). Extracted themes, as said by Braun & Clarke (2006, 25), illustrate relevant analytical points the researcher identifies in the data and should be used to assist readers understand “what it does or might mean”. Data analysis progressed in similarity to Braun & Clarke (2006, 16-23) guiding on the phases of data analysis. Figure 1 shows Labra et al. (2019, 5) design of Braun & Clarke six interactive phases of thematic analysis.

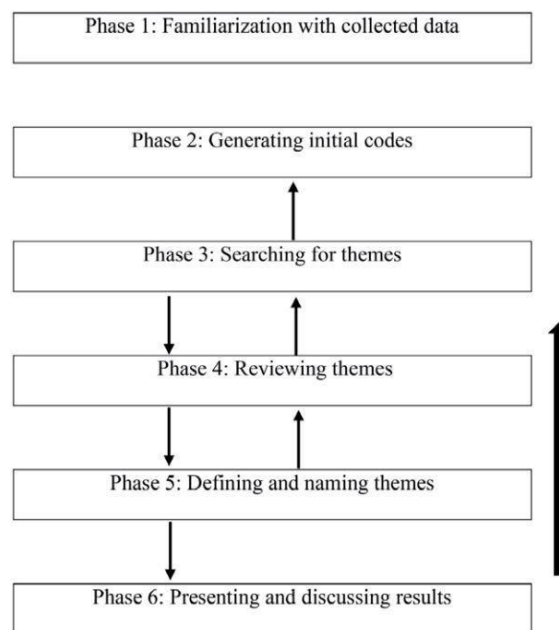


Figure 1: The six interactive phases of thematic analysis by Labra et al. (2019, 5)

This method, albeit linear looking, is considered by Nowell, Norris, White & Moules (2017, 4) as an “iterative and reflective process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases”. Labra, et al. (2019, 10) theory on five stages for identifying themes was used as the main tool in the analysis. Their theory also incorporates steps for categorizing and reviewing themes and is summarized as:

- Reading through the generated coding.
- Assessing the correlation and relevance of codes to interview and study objectives.
- Identification of themes, that is, grouping the coded information according to similarities or patterns.
- Reviewing the identified themes

- Reading the material to identify hierarchical relationships between the themes.

Overall, Braun & Clarke's (2006) guideline on thematic analysis, along with Labra et al. (2019) case study in thematic analysis in social work, served as the groundwork for conducting the data analysis for this research.

Intending to better identify and distinguish challenges from experiences in the transcripts, challenges were considered as situations that disrupt intercultural communication strategies and approaches and make it difficult for professionals to communicate with users. Experiences were considered as frequently observed occurrences during an intercultural communication event

The first phase of the data analysis, *familiarizing with the collected data*, started during interview transcription. Labra et al. (2019, 4) share that this step "involves proceeding through initial readings of the transcripts in order to find the most salient significations in the participants' testimonies". Listening to the audio records and, later, reading the transcripts, was a beneficial step that focused solely on getting acquainted with the data. The interviews transcription generated a 32 pages file that was printed and read thoroughly, twice. During the two-time reading, parts considered more relevant were highlighted, and comments were added when found necessary.

To start *Generating initial codes*, one table was created for each interview transcript to facilitate the categorizing of the material. Each table was composed of three columns entitled **Meanings**, **Code**, and **Excerpts** and it linked pertinent fragments of the data to a single idea, or meaning, identified to be connected to those fragments. That process was guided by the set of questions proposed by Labra et al. (2019, 6) to help identify important and interesting elements in the data set. Questions such: "what is this person trying to say?", "Why are they talking about that in this particular way?" and, "how should I interpret what I am reading?". The content of the transcription material was meticulously examined, and this phase generated 102 codes.

In the next phase, the new table gained a column named *themes*. This step involved re-evaluating those 102 codes, intending to group them into possible themes, in relevance to the testimony's excerpts. According to Labra et al. (2019, 8) "identification, differentiation, recombination, and grouping" is a crucial part of *searching for themes*. This activity resulted in rearranging, merging, and deleting codes and excerpts, and it concluded in the appearance of the first set of themes. At the end of this phase, 34 codes were arranged in 8 themes.

To *review the themes*, previously excluded codes and interview testimonies were re-evaluated for possible use and the table created in phase 3 went through a process that consisted in using

a group of questions proposed by Labra et al. (2019, 11) to systematically review the themes already generated. Some of the questions were: “is this a theme, sub-theme, or code?”, “does the theme accurately represent the data with which it is linked (codes and interview excerpts)?” and, “is the theme too abstract or difficult to understand or, conversely, is it so specific that it cannot be linked more broadly with data?” When phase 4 was concluded, themes and codes had been reorganized and the final analysis had generated 32 codes, 4 sub-themes, and 6 themes.

Phase 5 was conducted to, as Braun & Clarke (2006, 22) explain, “define and further refine the themes that you will present for your analysis, and analyze the data within them”. In this process, themes were renamed, sub-themes merged back into themes, and codes and excerpts went through another round of categorization and classification. The final data analysis table consisted of 32 codes, 2 sub-themes, and 6 renamed themes. Table 1 presents a summary of the data analysis process and generation of themes. Table 2 shows the system of identifying codes, themes and subthemes throughout data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS	
PHASE 1	Double reading 32 pages of interview transcriptions
PHASE 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grouping meaning, codes, and excerpts 102 codes identified
PHASE 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 102 codes became 34 after identification, differentiation, recombination, and grouping 8 themes identified from the 34 codes
PHASE 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34 codes became 32 after reevaluation of the codes 6 themes identified from 32 codes 4 subthemes identified from 2 themes
PHASE 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Another round of categorization and classification 6 renamed themes 2 subthemes identified from one theme

Table 1: Summary of data analysis

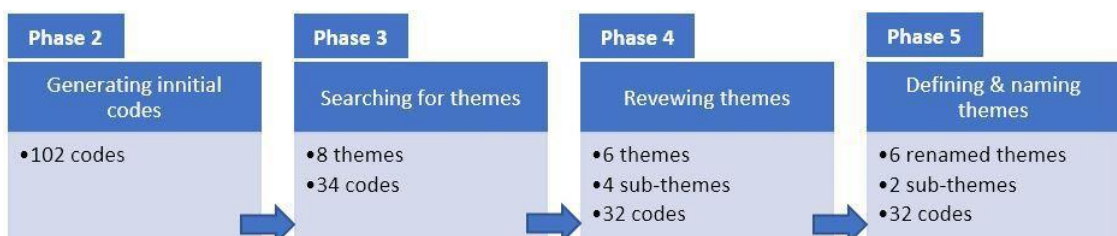


Table 2: Codes, themes and subthemes identified on each phase of thematic analysis

Following, a matrix with the identified themes.

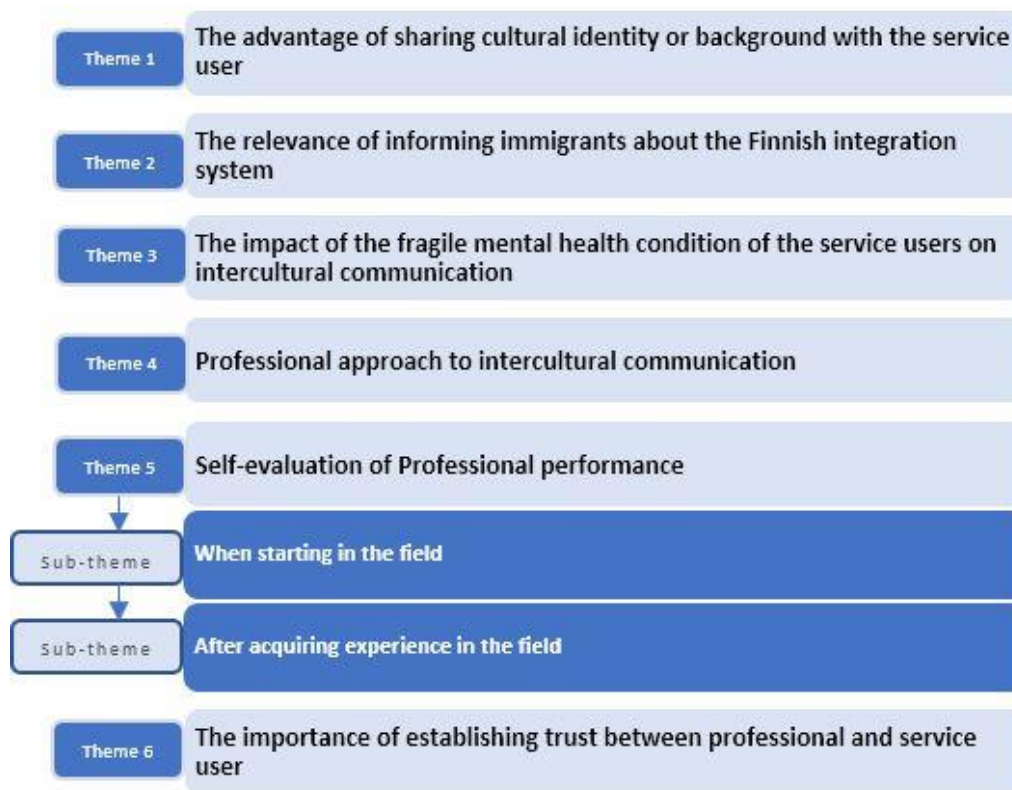


Figure 2: Experiences and challenges faced by Finnish welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration, when practicing intercultural communication

As presented in table 3, the themes identified after the data analysis are: the advantage of sharing cultural identity or background with service user, the relevance of Informing immigrants about the Finnish integration system, the impact of the fragile mental health condition of the service users on intercultural communication, professional approach to Intercultural communication, self-evaluation of professional performance, and establishing trust between professional and service user. Theme 5 has two subthemes. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), “subthemes exist ‘underneath’ the umbrella of a theme”, therefore, shouldn’t be used regularly, but only when elements in the theme have a specific focus that is essential for the research. The subthemes in themes 5 are: When starting in the field and After acquiring experience in the field.

Figures 3 to 6 display the individual tables depicting each theme and the code units (or subcategories) that helped identify the themes.

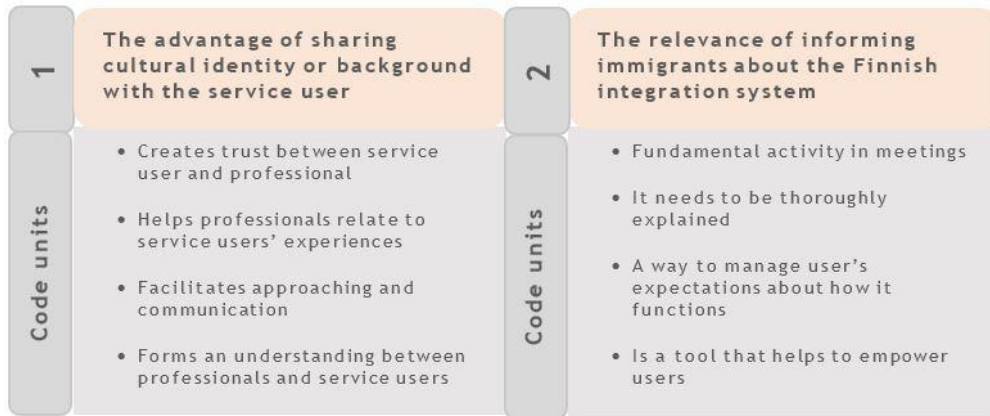


Figure 3: Theme 1 and 2 and their subcategories

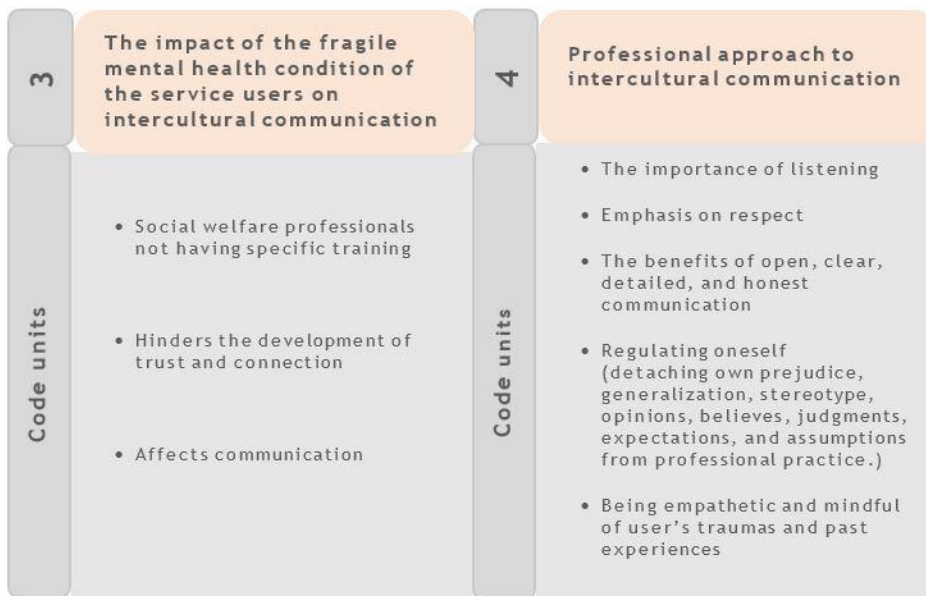


Figure 4: Theme 3 and 4 and their subcategories

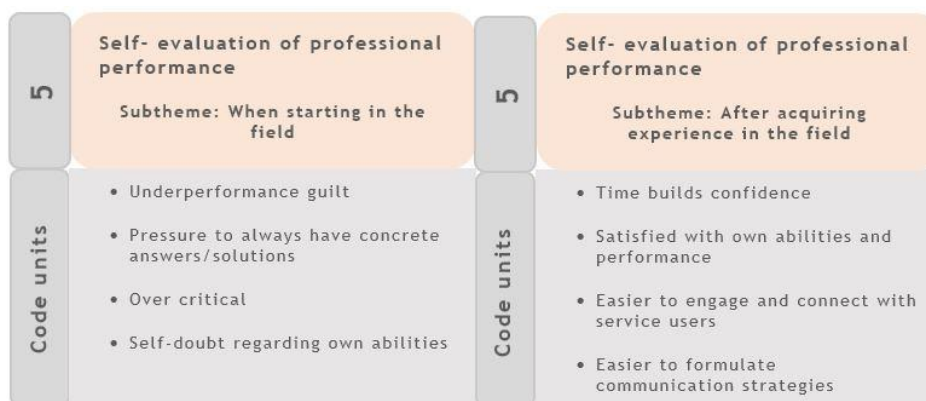


Figure 5: Theme 5, its two subthemes, and their subcategories



Figure 6: Theme 6 and its subcategories

5 Results

5.1 The advantage of sharing cultural identity or background with the service user

The interviews' statements revealed that the professionals recognize the impact sharing cultural identity or background has in creating trust between them and the users. This capacity is seen as an advantage that facilitates communication. Communicating in general and sharing personal information alike are essential features of the profession, therefore, approaching users and gaining their trust are two crucial phases of working with immigrants in the integration field.

Sharing the same cultural identity or background was also reported as a foundation that creates an understanding between professional and user and helps them relate to user's choices and experiences. This recognition came from personal experiences encountered in the workplace and has translated into situations e.g., a conflicting encounter in which the user had reservations and refused to talk to professionals when they meet. Contrarily, a social welfare professional having an immigrant background was reported to be an attribute that facilitated working in the field.

The parts in *Italic* are testimonies gathered during the interviews. They are examples of excerpts that supported the identification of each theme.

He is, like, 'what can this lady do for me? She doesn't understand anything of my background, anything of my culture, my language and so on.'

And I am also an immigrant in this society, so I am interacting with immigrants all the time as an immigrant. It's so natural and normal to me to work with people who come from somewhere else.

5.2 The relevance of informing immigrants about the Finnish integration system

The action of informing immigrants about the Finnish integration system was a unanimous appearance in all the interviews conducted for this thesis. It is perceived by the interviewees as a core part of their job requirement, therefore, a familiar experience.

It is also seen as a tool to support users' empowerment. According to the social welfare professionals, situations in which users have a certain expectation of how their integration process will proceed is a common occurrence. It is due to such instances, and to manage users' expectations about how the integration system functions, that these information exchange moments are important.

It was reported, for instance, cases in which users stopped coming to their meetings with the social workers due to frustration regarding how their integration plan was progressing and lack of hope that their situation would ever improve. Informing how integration agencies work, why some bureaucracy is necessary, where to find relevant information, how to fill forms and applications, among other instructions, is a means to assure that users can navigate their integration process conscious of possible setbacks and reassure them of the importance of going through with its conclusion.

You have to explain, you have to be very, very, open about the system. You have to, like, do your best that this person has all the necessary information.

It's like explaining a lot. A lot of the misunderstandings come from facts that people don't know how things work here and they assume.

It's one of the goals because of course we want people to become as independent as possible and feel empowered in the process.

5.3 The impact of the fragile mental health condition of the service users on intercultural communication

Interviewees shared another common element when revealing their experiences and difficulty in practicing intercultural communication; the understanding that immigrants in Finland come from diverse situations, and the trauma some of them cause may affect people's mental well-being.

To the professionals interviewed, such a fragile state affects communication because, among other things, it hinders the building of trust and connection. It was also shared that despite social welfare professionals not having specific training to diagnose mental health issues, it is

not atypical to meet users responding to certain situations presumed to be affected by some psychological distress.

The most common impediments revealed by the interviews were cases of users receiving but not processing news and instructions or reacting to them with elevated anger. Cases of users abandoning their integration plan or losing hope about their future were also told to be frequent occurrences.

They saw things, they have experienced things, but they are mentally broken down. They don't have the capacity to take any one more, you know, challenge.

Sometimes the person is just in such state of mind that they cannot really get anything. It doesn't matter how you try to explain, or try to be nice, or try to be strict, whatever is needed but the person is not receiving anything

This is something that you are really on a thin ice let's say, I mean, I don't have the training like health training.

5.4 Professional approach to intercultural communication

Permeating through every topic addressed during the interviews, the approaches professionals adopted during intercultural communication practices were constantly revealed. Practices that recognize the importance and benefits of listening, that emphasize respect, and are mindful of users' past experiences and traumas.

Self-regulation related to professionals' personal opinions, values, expectations, assumptions, and beliefs, was mentioned as important ethical work behavior. Interviewees expressed their support for self-regulation, emphasizing that practicing open, clear, detailed, and honest communication is a backbone to their work in the immigration integration field and, as such, should be practiced avoiding prejudiced attitudes, generalizations, and stereotyping.

I think the key factor here is to be open, to communicate openly.

Be sensitive about it and question our own prejudice.

Don't assume, always ask things.

Sometimes the culture as such doesn't have anything to do with it.

5.5 Self-evaluation of professional performance: when starting in the field

When discussing experiences lived while practicing intercultural communication, the social welfare professionals unanimously mentioned having to deal with their own performance pressure, especially when first joining the immigrant integration field. The most declared circumstances were cases of underperformance guilty, doubting their professional abilities, and being overly critical about their efficiency.

Particularly, the case of efficiency was brought to attention highlighting the professionals' initial expectation and concern to always have concrete answers and adequate solutions to every inquiry and necessity brought to them. Also mentioned, the vexing feeling of not being able to support or guide the users when the need emerged. Additionally, the need to *look professional and experienced* was cited as an advantage to encourage users to trust them.

I felt like there are some expectations from me and I don't know if I can fulfill them.

First, I always had to have some concrete thing.

5.6 Self-evaluation of professional performance: after acquiring experience in the field

Despite invariably starting with mentions of performance pressure, the conversation around intercultural communication experiences at work naturally evolved to the updated stance professionals take on their performance, realized by years of working in the field and polished by multiple *learn by doing* situations.

Professionals reported on how time builds confidence, on being satisfied with their abilities and performances, on how it's easier to engage and connect with users, and on formulating new communication strategies if the first attempt fails.

It's something that I've been doing for a long time, like, I might have some ideas of what could work and what maybe not.

I think that's something that I have learned during the years. Of course, it was not clear in the beginning.

I think it's more important that you don't have to have the ready answer for everything that somebody asks, but you need to show that you are interested, and you will help to find the answers.

5.7 The importance of establishing trust between professional and service user

Along with the importance of informing and demystifying the integration system in Finland, trust was a topic all professionals interviewed assigned great meaning to, identifying it as a challenging and crucial element in their field. Trust is seen by them as a central component to the success of every activity they carry out, claiming that the lack of trust, at any point of their professional relationship, makes it difficult to engage with users.

The respondents were precise in acknowledging that building trust requires time, patience, and respect, for reasons involving, among others, the fact that every user comes with different *emotional baggage* and experiences, both abroad and in Finland. It is also for that reason, they claim, that the process of establishing trust and the trustful relationship that has been already created cannot be taken for granted. Trust can always be lost. The significance of establishing trust was also made clear when, to succeed, every communication experience addressed during the interview depended on the users trusting the professionals.

It takes a long time to gain the trust, for example, many months.

A negative effect would be, definitely, losing trust.

6 Discussion

According to Saldana “outcomes are most often composed of essential representations and presentations of salient findings from the analytic synthesis of data” (2011,4). For this thesis, which aims to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social services professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland, those intercultural communication experiences will be addressed in relation to the existent literature on the subject. The results were produced from analyzing the transcripts of the unstructured interviews conducted with those professionals.

The intensification of the immigration phenomenon, prompted by the effects of globalization on societies, introduced and highlighted demands that required specific skills from the professionals involved in the process of integrating immigrants into a new society. In the case of social welfare professionals, whose work involves constant information exchange, the new scenery revealed the urgency to develop efficient intercultural communication strategies.

Intercultural communication is an event that occurs through the interaction of individuals with different cultural identities. That difference is accentuated during intercultural communication because, in those situations, the way a person communicates merges with their cultural identity, and this fusion might interfere with the interpretation of the message. In other words,

Patel et al. (2011,16) outline that the focus of the interaction will shift from the information that needs to be exchanged, to the culture the individuals communicating are from. And that might cause issues in terms of interpreting the message delivered.

Because of the issues that may arise during intercultural communication, related to message interpretation or otherwise, individuals usually favor communicating with people who share similar cultural backgrounds or identities with them. This claim agrees with the interview's testimonies whose analysis generated the first result: social welfare professionals recognizing the advantage of sharing cultural identity or background with the service user.

Cultural identity refers to how people view themselves, and is associated with belonging to a group that can exist in sharing religion, ethnicity, social class, nationality, etc. Cultural background encapsulates the circumstances of one's life experiences that have been shaped by the relationships and associations formed in the groups they belong to. (Davis 2021.) Those factors affect the communication process because they influence our perception, assumptions, and opinions, and influence lifestyle, decisions, and actions (Patel et al. 2011, 127; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy 2013, 63).

Utilizing the example shared by Samovar, et al. (2013, 356), who stated that "when patients and health care workers have diverse cultural backgrounds, patients frequently want to follow their cultural belief systems, which can hinder effective communication", it is possible to draw a parallel to the experiences shared by the social welfare professionals interviewed for this thesis. In this case, respondents related instances of users avoiding communication approaches made by them. They recognized the common feature behind this hesitation as the lack of trust that commonly rises when users conclude there are no similarities between their cultural background and/or identity and those of the professionals.

The dress code has also influenced the recognition of cultural identity, as reported. Clothes are a way to express your cultural identity, and in this situation, the user could identify the professional approaching them as belonging to different cultural identity and refused the approach altogether. It is not an unfounded hesitance, however. Samovar et al. (2013, 24, 228) mentions that the diverse expression of identity and the distinct communication styles that meet in an intercultural communication event has the potential to create "anxiety, misunderstandings, and even conflict", because those misunderstandings might lead to "stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism". Furthermore, Samovar et al (2013, 229) claim that in such occurrences, "flexibility and adaptation" is required.

Additional reporting of reasons that impaired communication included the need to use interpreters as both a positive and a challenging experience, a feature of the impact of language in communication. Respondents shared cases of users' excitement in telling their life

stories only when in the presence of a worker who shared the same language, and cases in which the use of an interpreter might have made communication more complicated. Anis and Turtiainen (2021, 12) tell of working with interpreters as a skill in “multicultural social work”. Ultimately, both positive and negative impacts highlight the necessity to create and maintain an atmosphere of trust and safety when communicating with users.

The impossibility to relate with service users based on culture might hamper the initial connection necessary to engage them in sharing their stories, therefore, slowing the development and deployment of their integration plan. Conversely, situations in which both parties shared a common cultural identity or background were reported to have facilitated both connection and communication.

In the interviews, communication was described as an effective way to disseminate knowledge. The intense exchange of information about the Finnish integration system, a constant practice of the integration field workers, was recognized as a tool to promote immigrants’ empowerment. It included tasks such as managing users’ expectations of how the Finnish integration system functions, to avoid frustration and misunderstandings. Integrating into a new society requires knowledge of, among others, its legal, economic, cultural, bureaucratic, and service structures. In a 2007 report released by the Justice Institute of British Columbia, immigrant women commented on the significance of accessing information, especially about services such as transportation, financial assistance, housing, and health. According to them, receiving information on those topics was “key to their safety and survival”. They also mentioned the “disempowering impact of not having that information.” (Justice Institute of British Columbia 2007.)

The United Nation’s International Organization for Migration released in 2016 a collection of guidelines aimed to protect migrants in countries experiencing conflict or natural disaster. The third guideline in the crisis preparedness chapter reads that to be able to enjoy their rights, migrants need to have access to resources such as documentation and basic public service (Migrants in Countries in Crisis 2016).

In Finland, informing immigrants about services is part of a collection of measures to facilitate integration. Municipalities employ immigrant advisors who can inform newcomers about integration, working life, education, etc. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018.) Because of its influence, the professionals interviewed for this thesis commented on the need to conduct this activity in a detailed and clear manner, citing the diversity, complexity, and quantity of information exchanged to be possibly overwhelming and frustrating to receive.

Mental health was mentioned as a factor that influences communication. Particularly in this analysis, immigrants' fragile mental health condition. The background for this circumstance is clear to the interviewees as coming from the service user's past trauma and experiences both before moving to Finland and related to this change. Dalgard and Thapa (2007) cite a survey in Oslo which associated non-western immigrants' psychological distress to negative life experiences and the lack of employment and income, social support, and empowerment.

THL, The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, support their view and adds that because mental health is a culturally sensitive phenomena, it is one of the most difficult issues to deal with. The institute describes negative experiences in the former country and in the new home country as possible causes for mental health problems and symptoms. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021c.)

According to the professionals, the most common outcome of that predicament is that users won't assimilate any of the information given, regardless of the intercultural communication strategy they employ. This condition may also impede the building of trust and connection necessary to stimulate users to share about their life situation and goals, crucial in developing an integration strategy.

Professionals shared the cultural interpretation of mental health issues as an additional impediment to practicing communication, relating that, in many cases, suggesting psychological assessment or support had a negative outcome as the service users felt offended by the suggestion. It is a statement that agrees with the topic previously discussed on how individuals' cultural identity can share their view of the world and themselves, and that includes their own physical and mental well-being and how to care for it. In that context, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare acknowledges that the way individuals interpret and recognize mental health issues is affected by their cultures. In some culture, it is dealt with in a stigmatized manner, while other cultures don't recognize the concept of mental health altogether. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2021c.)

Complications of the context mentioned above include the fact that social welfare professionals are not trained to diagnose or conduct proper activities with people living with psychiatric disorders, and sometimes a sensitive and respectful approach isn't enough to assure a successful communication encounter.

In dealing with both experiences and challenges when practicing intercultural communication, professionals reported an array of strategies that reflected their intercultural competence skills. Intercultural competence, as explained by Patel et al. (2011, 48), refers to the skills or understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, employed in managing intercultural communication encounters.

This ability allows professionals to provide services that are culturally sensitive and to navigate setbacks introduced by communication challenges, such as formally mentioned mental health issues and cultural background/identity divergences. To complement, Samovar et al. (2013, 242) share that “competent intercultural communication is achieved when the participants find commonality in ascribed and avowed identities.”

Barret (2012, 24-25) categorized four core components of intercultural competence and the actions that represent them: attitudes of respect for other cultures, listening and interacting skills, cultural and communicative self-awareness, and effective, appropriate and flexible communicative behavior. The thesis analysis results showed that respondents value a culturally sensitive approach that, according to them, emphasizes respect, favors the act of listening, is attentive to non-verbal language, practices open and honest communication, is mindful of cultural differences, and exercises self-regulation. Those approaches mirror Barret’s (2012, 24-25) intercultural competencies components and are, also, in agreement with the norms for engaging in effective intercultural interactions, proposed by Patel et al. (2011, 51-52). The norms include self-knowledge, the re-examination of prejudice, defining boundaries, and supporting diversity.

This thesis also identified a self-evaluation pattern performed by the professionals. Shaw & Lishman (1999, 1,3) explain that evaluation is intrinsic to the practice and delivery of social work and social care, that it helps to examine and improve effectiveness, and it must consider how professionals evaluate their practice. Other benefits of evaluation included accountability, knowledge expansion, and service development (Shaw & Lishman 1999, 1,3).

The interviewees’ self-evaluation practice related to the nature of their intercultural communication encounter (positive or negative experience) and the years of experience working in the immigration integration field. At first, those professionals would interpret a negative intercultural experience as one in which, for instance, they wouldn’t be able to offer immediate information or solutions to inquiries presented by the service users. The self-evaluation of the initial year generated feelings that included doubting their abilities and feeling pressured to perform exceedingly. In contrast, reports of current self-evaluation revealed confidence and satisfaction in their skills and practices and satisfaction with their performance. Besides time and experiences, other evidence can serve as a base for how professionals evaluate their practice and abilities. On that topic, Shaw & Lishman (1999, 14) describe “descriptions and inferences regarding service users, and about previous interventions by colleagues” as examples of factors that serve as evidence for professionals self-evaluation.

UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) links respect for the diversity of cultures and mutual respect to other agents that can guarantee international peace and security. In a more focused context, the final result identified in this research accounted for trust as a fundamental fact in practicing intercultural communication with immigrants. The data analysis in this research informed of professionals understanding that establishing trust between professional and service user is a process that, much like their other intercultural communication skills, requires patience and practice. This process was reported to be meaningful at any phase of an intercultural communication event, influencing the outcomes and determining what kind of relationship can be built between service user and service provider.

Trust is at the base of intercultural communication practices according to multiple authors. Patel et al. (2011, 148) emphasize the importance of trust when theorizing third culture. Popa (2014) shares that cultural values shape an individual's views of trustworthiness, which, in turn, affects intercultural encounters. Grothe & Starub (2008, 54) affirm that, while trust is fundamental to every human interaction, it is so, especially, in situations in which "experienced cultural differences seem to increase the unavoidable risks of human encounters".

In agreement with these authors, and many others specialized in the theme, the professionals view trust as a tool to suppress possible intercultural communication barriers. Effective exchange of information allows them to better negotiate cultural differences that would otherwise hinder their interaction, and as said by Patel et al. (2011,49) "Many of the problems in intercultural communication arise out of inadequate and inaccurate information and ignorance about diverse cultures".

6.1 Limitations of the study

Part of establishing the trustworthiness of research is to acknowledge its limitations. As is the case of this thesis, a careful and committed stance and approach to qualitative research didn't go without its limitations.

For instance, the data collection was done with a small number of professionals, and although it's part of qualitative research theory to affirm, as discussed earlier, that quality of data overrules quantity, the amount and variety of the findings in this thesis could be affected by that number, if considered that those results identified might not reflect the experiences and challenges faced by the entire community of social welfare professionals working with immigrant integration in Finland

Having acknowledged multiple similar answers in the range of three interviews, it is possible to suggest the data sample size was reached its saturation. However, as proposed by (Fusch & Ness 2015, 1409) “one cannot assume data saturation has been reached just because one has exhausted the resources”. It is, therefore, improbable to tell if new interviews would generate new data compared with the set that has already been collected.

Being produced by a single researcher also present a limitation to this work because it decreases the possibility to conduct certain trustworthiness-related activities, such as team members vetting rights, which could help prevent detrimental actions and avoid researcher bias (Birt et al. 2016, 1802, 1804).

6.2 Ethical considerations and risk assessment

While anticipating the risks on social science research is difficult, cautionary measures are necessary to ensure all parts involved in the research won't be exposed to any ethical, psychological or physical harm. Risk assessment starts earlier with design and methodology planning, it continues throughout the research, and considers individual and societal level risks. (European Commission 2018, 18.)

Part of presenting a reliable and credible study is to conduct every step of the research process in a manner that does not allow its ethicality to be questioned. This study's primary source of data came from interviewing and audio recording participants' personal experiences and it aimed to proceed according to ethical principles at an organizational, national and international level, following guidelines such as Laurea's Prevention of fraudulent activity, Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK)'s Responsible conduct of research, European Commission's Ethics in Social Science and Humanities, and All European Academies (ALLEA)'s The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

Those agencies and institutions have published a collection of ethical practices for researches involving human subjects. They concern, among others, privacy, safety, confidentiality, researcher's behavior and attitude, plagiarism, and data management. Those guidelines “instruct researchers in their work as well as in their engagement with the practical, ethical and intellectual challenges inherent in research” (All European Academies 2017, 4). They served as a cornerstone in this thesis. The most important practices were:

- Ensuring, before beginning and through the course of the research, that all parties involved in the project agree on the researchers' rights, responsibilities, obligations, and the principles concerning owning, archiving and accessing the data (Laurea 2020, 17).

- Respecting and protecting participants' welfare and safety, as well as respecting individual autonomy and obtaining free and informed consent (European Commission 2018, 4, 5).
- Respecting the confidentiality of data (All European Academies 2017, 6).
- During the research, taking account of and being sensitive to relevant differences in age, gender, culture, religion, ethnic origin, and social class (All European Academies 2017, 6).
- Conducting, analyzing, and documenting research with integrity, meticulousness, and accuracy (All European Academies 2017, 6; Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012, 32).
- Respecting other researchers' s work by citing their publications appropriately and giving due credit and weight they deserve (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012, 30).

Those principles have been considered in this thesis since its starting phase. Contacting participants and conducting the interviews were also done in tandem with the ethical guidelines. The Participation consent document and participants information sheets were presented, as advised by the General Data Protection Regulation, in an “intelligible and easily accessible form, using clear and plain language” (European Union 2016) to assure that participants were well informed and that their autonomy, safety, and privacy are considered, safeguarded, and respected. Additionally, the thesis plan was attached to the invitation email, so they could make a well-informed decision regarding partnering or not.

The invitation email contained what was known about the project at the time and assured all the ethical procedures would be observed during the interview, when handling their information, when analyzing the data, and at every phase through the entirety of the research. Following the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) guide on the ethical principles of research with human participants, the concern with causing no harm to participants also involved making sure their jobs weren't at risk when participating in the interviews. This matter was administered by ensuring the organizations and the participants' supervisors were aware of their participation.

As a confirmation, the supervisors answered the invitation email themselves, offering to forward the invitation to possible participants in their department, and requested no further proof or documentation before confirming their knowledge and approval. Additionally, participants confirmed they had discussed with their bosses about their participation before signing the participant consent form. Moreover, because it focuses on participants' experiences and challenges as social welfare professionals and not as an employer of any institution or organization, this thesis makes no mention or citation of any workplace's name or private information of any nature. It also has no intention to link the participants to their workplaces or to evaluate their workplaces in any instance.

As writing the thesis progressed, completing a literature search and writing the first topics in the theoretical framework, as well as writing this plan, has been executed minding the level of integrity, accuracy, and respect, expected when handling other researchers' work.

This project is human research but not a medical one. No personal data was needed for the construction of this study, and it is not to be collected or published. For the data collection, or in any other phase of this project, the people involved were adults who, before engaging in the research, were required to have read and signed legal documents necessary to comply with the ethical guidelines. For instance, the Participation informed consent document and the Participation information sheet.

Further, other criteria were evaluated and confirmed (e.g., physical integrity, mental health, and safety of the participants and/or their relatives are not addressed or endangered) before concluding that the study didn't need to go through an ethical review by the Human Research Ethical Committee.

The same accurate criteria so far mentioned was followed regarding final data management. The audio recordings and the interview transcription (both contained no indicators that will make it possible to identify the participants) were saved exclusively in a password-protected folder on the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher knew the password. Those files were kept solely by the interviewer and were not shared, uploaded, or published under any circumstances. They became unattainable by other people and were accessed only on the researcher's personal computer. After the publishing of the study, the documents will be kept by the researcher for a maximum period of 6 months and then be completely deleted from the computer, including trace files.

Finally, the criteria so far mentioned (responsibly, honestly, and reserving the anonymity of research subjects) was followed when reporting results and publishing the final paper.

6.3 Indicators of project performance

It is well known that, as put by Nowell et al. (2017, 1), conducting qualitative research requires "rigorous and methodical methods to create useful results". To Noble & Smith (2015, 1), it is "imperative that all qualitative researchers incorporate strategies to enhance the credibility of a study during research design and implementation". Assessing the quality of the qualitative research in this thesis was done following Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness. On that purpose, Nowell et al. (2017) guide that data analysis should be conducted meticulously and accurately "through recording, systematizing, and

disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible”.

Lincoln & Guba's (1985) theory points four means for operationalizing the criteria. They served as checkpoints for the methodology of this study. The first means, credibility, presents ways to assure the finds and interpretations produced in this study are honest. Achieving **credibility** is a goal implemented from the early steps of this research project and carried out throughout its development: through the methodology and by being meticulous and clearly illustrating every process of data collection and analysis.

Other actions performed in this research to achieve credibility included, as presented by Bhattacharjee (2012, 110), “verbatim transcription of interviews, accurate records of contacts and interviews, and clear notes on theoretical and methodological decisions”. Besides that, presenting the research results to the interview participants (respondent validation) was part of the plan to prove the credibility of this study. On respondent validation of the analyzed data, Birt, Scott, Cavers & Campbell (2016,1805) share that “if studies are undertaken to understand experiences and behaviors and to potentially change practice”, the final results should reflect the participants ‘experiences.

Participants received the research’s findings via email and were instructed on what respondent validation means and how to perform it. The email also clarified that, although they were not under any law-abiding obligation to perform the validation, it was a crucial practice in accounting for the accuracy of the results and the credibility of the findings.

The email suggested the participants read the attached file containing the analysis findings and interpretations and report back in case they identified any misinterpretation or find that the results were not fair or do not reflect in any way the experiences and difficulties shared during our interview. Then, it clarified this was needed so the thesis’ author could re-do the analysis. One interview participant answered the email confirming to agree with the findings and citing the interpretations were appropriate. No email was sent back to the author containing suggestions or critics about the findings and their interpretation.

The literature search conducted for this thesis, for example, can be demonstrated by steps such as: conducting the search in multiple databases, following the guidance of Laurea’s information literacy guide, selecting search terms based on the thesis’ aim, objectives, and research question, and evaluating the applicability of the results through the 2018 Critical Appraisals Skills Programme (CASP): Qualitative research checklist, a list of questions to help the researcher navigate through the found articles and assess their quality and validity. The terms used in the literature search are presented in the table below:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural communication • Cultural competence • Intercultural communication competence • Intercultural competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social work • Social service • Social workers • Social service workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigrants • Immigrant integration • Immigrant • Migrant population • Integration • Migrant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic analysis • Qualitative research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finnish • Finland
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Table 3: Literature search terms

Besides appealing to the credibility criteria, the benefits of conducting an effective literature review include, as explained by Paré, Trudel, Jaana, & Kitsiou (2014, 183), “advance the knowledge and understand the breadth of the research on a topic of interest, synthesize the empirical evidence”.

According to Bhattacharjee (2012, 110), **dependability** can be achieved by “providing adequate details about their phenomenon of interest and the social context in which it is embedded”. The methodology in this research has been constructed to follow a renowned framework in the field of qualitative research, thematic analysis, and social work. Likewise, the theoretical framework was constructed based on literature sources that surfaced from a meticulous literature review to ensure it supports the methodology and provides a quality, heterogeneous, and comprehensive approach. Lincoln & Guba (1985) claim that “when readers are able to examine the research process, they are better able to judge the dependability of the research”. This claim regards the commitment to perform this research clearly and document the decisions and measures taken in every step, as well as the methodological and theoretical bases that guided them.

To prove the **confirmability** of the study, researchers must demonstrate that the findings and conclusions produced came exclusively from the data. This is connected to the measures presented in the topics of dependability, credibility, and confirmability that were performed during the execution of this study.

Nowell et al (2017) summarized Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness on qualitative research in a list of concrete actions. Following their list, measures to ensure the trustworthiness of this study included:

- prolonged engagement with data.
- Reflective journaling to document thoughts about potential codes/themes.
- Document theoretical and reflective thoughts.
- Safe and well-organized storage of all data.
- Use of coding framework and diagramming codes.

- Respondent validation.
- Report on the reason for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study.

Additional steps encompassed, as presented by Noble & Smith (2015, 3), acknowledging and accounting for personal bias and making sure they won't interfere with critical reflection and influence methodology and findings.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

This thesis explored welfare professionals' experiences and challenges in intercultural communication practices in the context of immigrant integration in Finland. Communicating in a multicultural setting is a practice expected to face setbacks. With the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, it was possible to conclude that professionals identify the fragile mental health condition of the service users and the lack of cultural background or identity similarity between them as examples of situations that hinders intercultural communication events. The most common occurrences were described to be the constant exchange of information about the Finnish integration system and how relevant it is in supporting users' empowerment. Additionally, the continuous need to build and maintain with service users a relationship that is based on trust.

While this thesis did not intend to evaluate professionals' strategies and competencies, the interview and subsequent analysis revealed the social welfare professionals' range of culturally sensitive approaches when practicing intercultural communication and their tendency to evaluate their performances and cultural competence abilities in association with a positive or negative communication outcome.

No major difficulty was faced when producing this thesis. Despite it being developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, most of its phases and steps were performed at home and online, with a few instances of in-person meetings needed. Despite some previously discussed limitations, this study might be beneficial, on a larger scale, considering that immigration challenges nations to provide effective integration services that can only be possible with well-equipped social welfare professionals and institutions. Whereas locally, it might provide a helpful and practical framework for social welfare workers and institutions in Finland dealing with immigrant integration, to identify and address challenging situations in intercultural communication practices in an increasingly multicultural Finland.

During each interview conducted, professionals were inquired about improvements that could be made, to help overcome the challenges identified in this study and ensure effective

intercultural communication practices in their field of work. Their suggestions are in tandem with the ones that arose naturally at the conclusion of this research.

The first suggestion references the need to offer multicultural training and education for social welfare professionals and those soon to become one. Training, for those who are already working in the field, in the form of workshops and courses addressing the increasing need to have culturally sensitive and multiculturally trained professionals in the country. Education, in the form of mandatory multicultural studies available in educational institutions for the individuals interested in pursuing a career in the field.

Ensuring cross-sectoral cooperation could be a great tool to ensure a seamless provision of social welfare services offered and performed by governmental institutions, private agencies, and non-governmental organizations, all belonging to different sectors of society. It would provide, for instance, a flow of information that could be beneficial for communicating with immigrants and formulating an integration plan.

Finally, having immigrants participating and cooperating with the decision-making process of public policies and services is perhaps the most important suggestion in this study. The way the integration system functions and the steps that encompass the integration process, including the constant meetings with the social welfare professionals, could become more culturally sensitive, because it would consider, in its development, the opinions of those who have been through the system themselves.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet



AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
University of Applied Sciences

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1 (2)

May 2021

Study title: Immigrant integration and intercultural communication practices of social welfare professionals in Finland: a qualitative study.

Invitation to participate in a research study

We'd like to invite You to take part in our research study, where we aim to interview social welfare workers in Finland working with immigrant integration. The research purpose is to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland.

Working in partnership with [Organization's Name] we intend to interview your social welfare professionals to discuss their experiences and challenges in practicing intercultural communication.

This information sheet describes the study and Your role in it. Before you decide, it is important that You understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for You. Please take time to read this form and discuss it with others if You wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if You would like more information, please ask us. After that, we will ask You to sign a consent form to participate in the study.

Voluntary nature of participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. If You withdraw from the study or withdraw Your consent, any data collected from You before the withdrawal can be included as part of the research data.

Purpose of the study

The research seeks to explore the experiences and challenges faced by social services professionals in Finland, who work with immigration integration, when practicing intercultural communication.

The purpose of the research is to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland.

Who is organizing and funding the research?

This research is not receiving any public or private funding. We are working in partnership with [Organization's name] solely in terms of having access to their staff who are willing to participate in the project.

What will the participation involve?

- Being in contact with the researcher to schedule the interview date.
- Being privately and individually interviewed once by the researcher.
- Signing the Participant Consent Form.
- Agreeing with the audio recording of the interviews.
- Agreeing with the topics addressed in the interview as presented in the interviews' topic list.

Possible benefits of taking part

No financial benefit is involved in the participation in this study. However, professionally, participating means contributing to the broad discussion of intercultural communication in social work. Also, to create a helpful and practical framework for social welfare workers and institutions dealing with immigrant integration, and to identify and address challenges in intercultural communication practices in an increasingly multicultural Finland.

May 2021

Possible disadvantages and risks of taking part

Given the private nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, no risks and advantages are involved in participating in this project.

Financial information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to You. You will receive no payment for Your participation.

Informing about the research results

This research is part of the researcher's Masters' degree thesis.

The project is human research but not a medical one. No personal data is needed for the construction of this study and it is not to be collected or published. The final Thesis is going to be published and seen in Theseus (Open Repository Theseus – online access to theses and publications from Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences).

Data management plan

The audio recordings and the interview transcription (both contained no indicators that will make it possible to identify the participants) will be saved exclusively in a password-protected folder on the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher will know the password. No documents will be uploaded in a cloud service or any online storage service. Those files are to be kept solely by the interviewer and will not be shared, uploaded or published under any circumstances. They will become unattainable by other people and will be opened only in the researcher's personal computer. After the publishing of the study, the documents will be kept by the researcher for a maximum period of 6 months and then be completely deleted from the computer, including trace files.

Preliminary list of questions to be asked in the interview (If more questions are formulated, they will be released to the participants beforehand)

1. How would you describe the experience of professionally interacting with immigrant clients?
2. What are your intercultural communication practices at work?
3. What are the positive effects of successful intercultural communication interactions?
4. Can you describe a positive intercultural communication experience?
5. What are the possible effects of difficult intercultural communication interactions?
6. Can you describe a challenging intercultural communication experience?

Further information

Further information related to the study can be requested from the researcher at any time online or via phone.

Contact details of the researchers

Researcher / Student

Name: Velumma Valtari

Tel. number: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Supervisor

Name: Salla Kivelä

Name of the organization / Faculty: Laurea University of Applied Sciences

Tel. number: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

August 2021

Title of the study: Immigrant integration and intercultural communication practices of social welfare professionals in Finland: a qualitative study.

Researcher: Velumma Valtari [REDACTED] (conducting the study for her Masters' degree thesis at Laurea University of Applied Sciences.)

Supervisor: Salla Kivelä [REDACTED]

I have been invited to participate in the above research study whose purpose is to enhance the knowledge and importance of intercultural communication competence of social welfare professionals working in the field of immigrant integration in Finland.

I have read and understood the written participant information sheet. The information sheet has provided me sufficient information about above study, the purpose and execution of the study, about my rights as well as about the benefits and risks involved in it. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I have had sufficient information of the collection, processing and transfer/disclosure of my personal data during the study and the Privacy Notice has been available.

I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I have not been pressurized or persuaded into participation. I have had enough time to consider my participation in the study.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without giving any reason. I am aware that if I withdraw from the study or withdraw my consent, any data collected from me before my withdrawal can be included as part of the research data.

By signing this form I confirm that I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

If the legal basis of processing personal data within this study is a consent granted by the data subject, by signing I grant the consent for process my personal data. I have right to withdraw the consent regarding processing of personal data as described in the Privacy Notice.

Date

Signature of Participant

Appendix 3: List of interview topics

Preliminary list of topics addressed in the interview

Title of the study: Immigrant integration and intercultural communication practices of social welfare professionals in Finland: a qualitative study.

1. How would you describe the experience of professionally interacting with immigrant clients?
2. What are your intercultural communication practices at work?
3. What are the positive effects of successful intercultural communication interactions?
4. Can you describe a positive intercultural communication experience?
5. What are the possible effects of difficult intercultural communication interactions?
6. Can you describe a challenging intercultural communication experience?