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UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Parbati Tamang

# **Cultural Adaptation Challenges in Team Collaboration**

A Study of International Employees in Finnish Workplaces

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**Author:** Parbati Tamang  
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**ABSTRACT:**

This thesis investigates how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration among international employees in Finnish workplaces. The ageing population and the increasing labor shortages in Finland have intensified reliance on international workers, but studies have shown that there has always been an issue of misalignment between the official workplace inclusion policies and the actual experiences of international employees. Even though there have been efforts at the policy level, like the Talent Boost Program, organizational and team-level integration issues are empirically understudied. This study fills that gap by focusing on the influence of cultural adaptation processes on daily collaboration by considering the opinions of the international employees themselves. This study uses a qualitative research design with an interpretivist paradigm. International employees of various national backgrounds who are employed in the recycling, logistics, printing, hospitality, and retail businesses (Finnish organizations) participated in ten semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was performed by the six-phase thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke's (2006). The theoretical framework combines four complementary theories: Berry's acculturation model, Kim's stress-adaptation-growth theory, Ward's ABC model, and Sussman's cultural identity model, alongside organizational-level frameworks of cross-cultural communication competence and inclusive leadership. An analysis resulted in six themes, namely, cultural adaptation processes, communication styles and challenges, teamwork and collaboration, inclusion and belonging, coping strategies and identity development, and organizational support. The findings indicate that the main mechanisms in which cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork are language barriers, the Finnish norms of directness and silence, and the disjunction between the formal structural inclusion and the informal relational belonging. Most of the participants did not alter their base cultural identity but instead altered their professional behavior, which aligns Sussman's additive identity pattern. The organizational support was mostly restricted to task training and safety; thus, the international employees had to face cultural and social challenges on their own. The findings of the research lead to four evidence-based recommendations to Finnish organizations such as systematic cultural orientation programs, language support at workplaces, articulation of workplace rights and inclusive leadership practices. The findings aid empirical and theoretical material that exists in the literature concerning cultural adaptation and multicultural teamwork within the Finnish workplace environment.

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**KEYWORDS:** Cultural adaptation, Finnish workplace, multicultural teamwork, qualitative research, organizational inclusion, intercultural competence, international employees

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## Abbreviations

**ABC** – Affective, Behavioural, Cognitive (Model of Acculturation)

**AUM** – Anxiety/Uncertainty Management

**CCC** – Cross-Cultural Communication

**CQ** – Cultural Intelligence

**ICC** – Intercultural Communication Competence

**SAG** – Stress–Adaptation–Growth (Model)

**OECD** – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

## 1 Introduction

The contemporary world of work differs significantly from that of previous decades as a result of an incredible pace of industrial change, the digitalization process, and increased interdependence between global and regional economies. Modern workplaces have been transformed by globalization and digitalization to increase cross-border interactions and redefine the workforce composition, which creates a greater cultural heterogeneity in organizations and work units (Friedman, 2005; Stahl et al., 2021). These changes have altered the nature of how organizations operate, communicate and manage human resources and cross-cultural sharing of professional knowledge and collaboration have become significant drivers of innovation and competitiveness. This interconnectedness has enhanced the occurrence of international professionals in workplaces and highlights the need to understand cultural adaptation and its influence on teamwork and collaboration. Empirical research on multicultural work teams demonstrates that team diversity may lead to process gains (creativity, innovation, and enhanced perspective on issues) as well as process losses (conflict and communication challenges) (Stahl et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2021).

Finland provides a significant context for the study of cultural adaptation because the country is presently facing significant demographic and economic pressures associated with the ageing of population and declining workforce. The Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare projects that by the year 2030, over one-quarter of Finland's population will be aged over 65, which poses problems with regards to the sustainability of the country's national economy, health care and the pension system (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023). To meet these challenges, Finland has introduced policies to attract and retain international professionals. National programmes such as Talent Boost, aim to simplify the residence permit processes, promote employer advisory services, and support career services that help the international professionals to enter the labor market (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024; European Commission, 2024). In addition, the programs like the Work in Finland and regional Talent Hub

initiatives provide employers with an access to foreign talent and provide newcomers with integration support, recruitment events, career services, and networking opportunities (Work in Finland, n.d.; Talent Hub Eastern Finland, n.d.). Even though these programmes have enhanced awareness and entry level opportunities, studies indicate that long-term integration, language acquisition, employment retention and career mobility are still challenges to many international professionals.

Despite being a well-known country with equality, transparency and high quality of life, international employees can still encounter challenges of adjusting to the Finnish work culture. The Finnish work culture can be described as having a flat structure, consensus-based decision-making, punctuality, as well as comparatively direct communication styles (Hofstede et al., 2010; TEK, n.d.). Such norms can be strange and uncomfortable to individuals with more hierarchical, collectivist, or expressive cultures. Furthermore, inadequate informal networking, a high value of independence, and cultural value of silence may lead to misunderstanding and feeling of exclusion. The language barrier is also a significant barrier particularly in organizations where Finnish or Swedish is the primary working language (Work in Finland, n.d.). Consequently, international employees may face social isolation, miscommunication, and less participation in collaborative processes, which can negatively affect individual well-being and team performance (Stahl et al., 2010; Shumilova et al., 2012).

The aim of this thesis is to examine how cultural adaptation challenges affect international employees in Finland, especially their impact on teamwork and collaboration in the workplace settings. Even though cultural adaptation is influenced by the broader societal factors such as labor market environment and integration policies, the present study focuses on interpersonal and organizational experiences in Finnish workplaces. To achieve this aim, the study adopts a qualitative research design in order to explore the lived experiences of international employees. The qualitative approach is suitable as it allows obtaining a deep insight into perceptions, meaning-making

processes, and work-related interactions associated with cultural adaptation and teamwork.

Despite the diversity and inclusion policies in Finland, the international employees continue to face significant challenges in adjusting to the Finnish workplace culture. According to research, Finland has been more internationalized, but issues of integration remain, particularly in communication, networking, and involvement in team-based work (Shumilova et al., 2012). The direct communication styles and flat hierarchies are incompatible with the needs of the more collectivist or expressive culture employees, leading to the misunderstanding of ambiguity, and feeling of being excluded.

The literature is clear that multicultural teams do have the potential to improve innovativeness and problem-solving, although the efficacy of effective cooperation depends on the way, in which cultural differences are viewed and managed. The meta-analytic and review studies indicate that cultural diversity within the teams may generate process gains (e.g., creativity and greater information) and losses (e.g., task conflict and less social integration) with contextual moderators (e.g., language fluency, leadership, and organizational practices) influencing whether diversity leads to positive or negative outcomes (Stahl et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2021). In the Finnish setting, few empirical studies examine how cultural adaptation influences teamwork and collaboration at the workplace level. Although previous research has discussed the employability and policy initiatives, minimal attention has been given to the interpersonal collaboration and organizational practices that determine team integration.

The purpose of this study is to address this gap by examining the cultural adaptation experience of the international employees in the Finnish workplace and its effect on teamwork, communication, and inclusion. It also discusses the organizational practices and interventions that could be used to improve intercultural competence and effectiveness of multicultural teams.

The study addresses this research gap through the following research question:

*“How do cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration among international employees in Finnish workplaces?”*

Sub-questions:

- a) What are the main cultural and organizational barriers that international employees face when adapting to Finnish work culture?
- b) What practices or strategies can organizations implement to support more inclusive and collaborative multicultural teams?

The research question is intentionally framed at the organizational level instead of the societal or policy level based on several reasons that are interrelated. First, although Finland already made significant strides in the area of national integration policy by implementing Talent Boost program or regional Talent Hub initiatives, current evidence points to the fact that formal policy is not enough to address interpersonal and structural challenges of international employees in workplaces on a daily basis (OECD, 2025). Societal-level integration issues, including residence permit processes, language policy, and the provision of public services are clearly important; however, these aspects are mostly beyond the direct influence of individual organizations and teams. On the contrary, organizational practices such as inclusive leadership behaviors, onboarding design, diversity training, mentoring structures, team communication norms are some practical organizational mechanisms that can be actively shaped by employers to improve collaboration with international employees. Second, literature review reveals that the primary knowledge gap is specifically on the organizational and team level. While policy-level measures are researched, little empirical data has been devoted to the mechanisms by which organizational culture and team interaction can influence the adaptation experience and teamwork capacity of international professionals in Finland (Shumilova et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2021). Thus, this study addresses that gap, although organizational inclusion is defined by and acts within the wider societal and structural pressures.

The research is narrowed down to the experiences of international employees because the objective is to learn how cultural adaptation and collaboration are perceived and negotiated by the respondents that have to go through the Finnish workplace norms directly in the everyday organizational life. This emphasis is explained by the fact that previous studies in Finland have been more concerned with policy-level integration and access to labor markets than the actual workplace experience of international employees at both organizational and team levels. Simultaneously, this view does not mean that only the employees produce the challenges of adaptation, or that Finnish employers and organizations have no responsibility. Instead, the analysis is based on the assumption that adaptation is a relational and an organizationally structured process that is influenced by leadership practices, communication norms, language expectations, and inclusion workplace structures.

This study is significant at academic, organizational, and broader societal levels. At the academic level, it contributes to the growing body of literature on cross-cultural adaptation and multicultural teamwork, with the insights provided by the Finnish context, which has not been examined thoroughly. This study offers some qualitative insights on the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and teamwork dynamics among international employees in Finnish workplaces. At the organizational level, the managers and human resource professionals can employ the findings to reinforce the onboarding, diversity training and team-building processes that facilitate the integration of international employees. Organizations can enhance collaboration and innovation by reducing communication barriers, cultural differences and informal networking gaps. At a broader societal level, although this research focuses on organizational and team-level dynamics, its findings are relevant to the wider goals of Finland on labor market integration and workforce diversification since the enhancement of workplace inclusion practices can serve to retain and integrate international talent at the national level.

The study is based on the experiences of international employees working in the Finnish organizations, with a particular focus on how they adapt and collaborate in team environments. The participants represent different professional fields in Finland allowing the study to have different points of view on cultural adaptation and teamwork.

The study is limited to a Finnish context and does not mean to generalize the findings to other countries or industries besides those that were represented in the sample. It focuses at current adaptation experiences, instead long-term change over time. The scope is intended produce practical knowledge on cultural adaptation and teamwork that can be used to inform future organizational and policy interventions. It is concentrated on team-level and organizational experiences instead of national-level integration policies.

The thesis is organized into five chapters each addressing various elements of the research. Chapter 1 introduces the background, problem statement, research objectives, questions, significance, scope, and the structure of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant theories and empirical studies on cultural adaptation, teamwork, Finnish work culture, organizational inclusion. It also identifies the main gaps in literature and represents the conceptual framework according to which the study is developed. Chapter 3 explains the qualitative research design, data collection process, ethical considerations, and analytical techniques. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of study provided on the topic grouped by themes according to the research questions. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework, outlines the academic and practical implications of the study, identifies limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

## **2 Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on cultural adaptation, cross-cultural communication, and organizational inclusion in multicultural work environments with special reference to international employees in Finland. Its purpose is to identify the key concepts, analyze the most prominent theoretical views of adaptation and teamwork, overview the literature on multicultural collaboration within the Finnish setting, and find out the gaps in the literature. The chapter attracts three streams of theory that are interrelated: cultural adaptation and acculturation theories, cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence, and organizational inclusion and leadership in multicultural settings. These combined views form the basis of the theoretical framework of the study that describes the interaction of adaptation, communication, and inclusion in determining the impacts of teamwork and collaboration among international employees within the Finnish workplaces.

Although this research focuses on the experiences of foreign employees, the literature reviewed in this regard implies that effective adaptation cannot be viewed as an individual process only. Cultural adaptation and collaboration are not only influenced by the efforts of the employees to acclimate but also the degree to which organizations provide an inclusive environment of participation, communication, and belonging. This means that issues related to differences in communication style or cultural expectation are not the only potential challenges in the Finnish workplace setting, but also the organizational culture, including informal language norms, network access, leadership behavior, and transparency of workplace structures. Therefore, the present study examines the experiences of the employees without ignoring the reality that the experiences are created within the framework of wider organizational and structural conditions.

## **2.1 Cultural Adaptation and Acculturation Theories**

### **2.1.1 Overview of Cultural Adaptation**

Cultural adaptation is a complicated psychological, behavioral, and social process that involves adapting individuals to a new cultural setting. It is associated with the acquisition of new cultural norms, understanding of new social signals, control over identity reconstruction, and achieving emotional balance under the conditions of a foreign environment (Ward et al., 2001). The idea has become even more significant in the globalized labor markets, where the mobility of the labor force is growing faster, and employees must adjust to the differences in workplaces. Berry (1997, 2005) suggests that adaptation is a process and an outcome that involves behavior and attitude change as individuals adjust to the interaction between the cultural system of the host and their heritage.

In an organizational environment, cultural adaptation influences the patterns of interaction of international employees with local co-workers, their perception of managerial expectations and team based performance. Adaptation is not only assimilation into a host culture but also an active process of meaning and belonging negotiation (Berry, 1997, 2005). This is especially relevant in Finland, where the country has a unique workplace culture such are characterized by egalitarian, flat hierarchies, with supervisors being facilitators instead of authority figures (Pöllänen, 2021). The employees have a high degree of autonomy and handle their tasks independently and also take initiative. Communications are usually concise and direct, and there is a certain appreciation of silence (Hall,1976; TEK, n.d.). It is important to understand these characteristics to investigate how international employees can negotiate the process of teamwork and collaborate to the Finnish work environments. Therefore, the theoretical backgrounds of the adaptation study allow gaining a valuable insight into the experience and reaction of international employees to Finnish work culture.

### 2.1.2 Berry's Acculturation Model

One of the most effective frameworks presented in the cultural adaptation is the acculturation framework presented by John W. Berry. It defines acculturation as a process of cultural and psychological change that takes place due to prolonged interaction between individuals who represent other cultural groups. The acculturation process includes culture shock and stages of culture shock. More than 100 theories of acculturation have been developed by scholars in various fields (Rudiman, 2003); but more recent studies have concentrated on alternative and various strategies and the impact that acculturation has on individuals and the intervention that can be implemented to facilitate the process (Berry, 1992).

Berry developed an acculturation model that classifies individual adaptation strategies on the two dimensions (Berry, 1992). The first dimension concerns the retention or rejection of an individual's native culture (i.e., "Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?"). The second dimension concerns the adoption or rejection of the host culture. ("Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with the larger society?") Based on these two questions, four acculturation strategies are identified:

1. Assimilation: This arises when the members of the host or dominant culture embrace the cultural norms of these cultures and, in the process, abandon their own culture. They can become integrated into the new culture since they may sacrifice their culture.
2. Separation: The separating individuals rebuff the dominant culture and are eager to preserve their own original culture. Such a strategy can be frequently observed in those communities where ethnic enclaves are created and cultural practices and values are maintained.

3. Integration: This is the strategy of individuals embracing the cultural norms of the host culture and at the same time remaining with their traditional culture. Integration usually results in biculturalism, where people can negotiate between the cultural contexts.
4. Marginalization: Marginalization is experienced when people do not accept their original culture as well as the dominant culture. This may cause alienation and confusion of identity, as they would not find a place to fit in either of the cultures.

		Value and Maintain Native Culture	
		YES	NO
Value and Maintain Host Culture	YES	Integration	Assimilation
	NO	Separation	Marginalization

**Figure 1.** Berry's Acculturation Model

The model by Berry is especially useful in explaining the diverse patterns of adapting behaviors of international employees in Finland. Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2004) noted that different acculturation methods can be applied by individuals in various aspects of life. An employee could integrate in the workplace by using the Finnish styles of communication but remain separate in private life by continuing to practice their cultural traditions. This highlights the situational and dynamic aspect of acculturation, which is affected by the contextual requirements and social settings.

The model developed by Berry has been used extensively in empirical studies of work and migration situations. In a meta-analysis of 83 studies, Nguyen and Benet-Martinez (2013) have identified that biculturalism, which is equivalent to the integration strategy of Berry, was positively correlated with both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Arends-Toth and van de Vijer (2004) used the framework developed by Berry in the European workplace context and applied it to the Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands, and they have found that those who retained their heritage identity but intervened in the host culture were the ones who reported higher well-being and more positive intergroup relations than the ones who engaged in assimilation or separation. More recently, Benet-Martinez and Haritatos (2005) established that bicultural people who have formed a low conflict between their two cultures' performances exhibit better social functioning and creativity, both of which are directly related to multicultural teams.

These trends are directly applicable to the Finnish setting, where studies have recorded that international professionals experience marginalization effects that are directly associated with being locked out of informal workplace networks and a lack of support in the Finnish language that hinders the integration strategy despite the fact that individuals may be willing to interact with the host culture (Shumilova et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Berry's model is not limited to individual psychology, but it informs and guides organizational practices. As employers are becoming more aware, integration is a two-way process that involves adjustment by both international employees and host organizations. Making the organization inclusive through the provision of language classes, mentorship, and culturally competent leadership will lead to integration and diversity, as stated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2024) and Business Finland (2023). On the other hand, culture shock and disengagement may be experienced by international employees when the organization involves full assimilation without adapting it in the same way.

The initial phase of the acculturation process is culture shock, which is an emotional and cognitive disorientation in a person due to their exposure to a different set of norms (Ward et al., 2001). Direct communication and frequent breaks or silence as workplace norms in Finland are some of the factors that might cause culture shock among international employees (Work in Finland, n.d.). However, over time, most of the employees pass through the adjustment stages that include initial euphoria, disillusionment, learning, and adaptation. This smooth transition is consistent with the stress adaptation growth (SAG) dynamic introduced by Kim (2001), which explains the cross-cultural adaptation process.

Although Berry's model has a theoretical background, it also has its drawbacks. Critics observe that the model fails to consider the structural and power-related factors that may affect the results of adaptation. As an example, integration needs participation and recognition opportunities, which are greatly reliant on organizational inclusiveness. Even the well-adapted employees in Finland can be hindered by the structural barriers, which do not allow full inclusion and the progress largely depends on the Finnish language fluency and ability to access informal networks (Talent Hub Eastern Finland, n.d.). Thus, the results of acculturation cannot be comprehended as only individual decisions—they also depend upon the institutional practices and attitudes of society toward diversity.

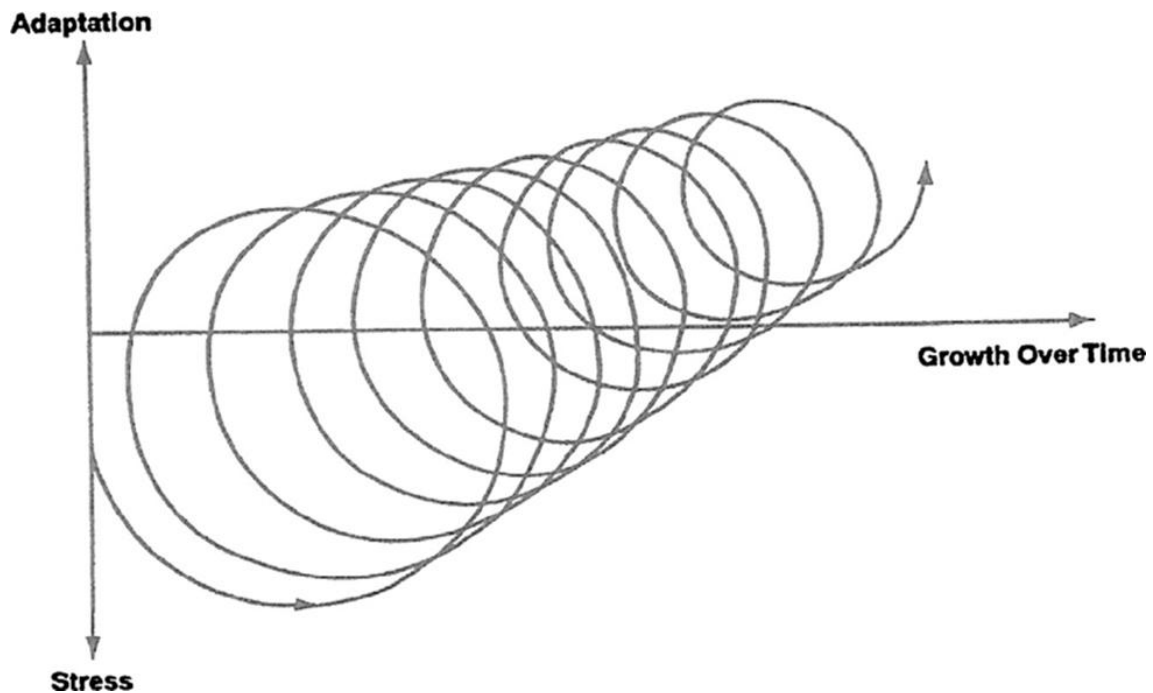
Despite these criticisms, the model created by Berry is still a foundation of research into how international employees adapt to the multicultural setting. The most conducive to successful teamwork, innovation, and long-term retention turns out to be the integration strategy as a combination of the preservation of culture and the inclusion of the latter into Finnish social and work life. With adaptation as a reciprocal process between employees and organizations, Berry's theory provides the theoretical foundation for designing inclusive policies that not only enable individual adaptation but also organizational learning and cultural enrichment.

### **2.1.3 Kim's Stress–Adaptation–Growth Theory**

Stress-Adaptation-Growth (SAG) is a modernized model by Young Yun Kim (2001, 2017) that gives one of the most holistic accounts of cross-cultural adaptation as an ever changing, continuous, and self-renewing process. Contrary to linear models, Kim develops adaptation as a spiraling process where individuals go through periods of stress reiteration, adaptation and growth, gradually acquiring intercultural competence and psychological resilience.

The SAG process model comprises three phases that are connected to each other:

1. **Stress:** The individual is initially confronted with feelings of disorientation or anxiety when confronted with new norms, values, or patterns of communication. These stressors can be based on language difficulty, social ostracism, or even the difference in the expectations of the workplace.
2. **Adaptation:** The person reacts to this by being actively involved in learning, problem-solving, and behavior change. This can include the attainment of new cultural understanding, the establishment of coping skills, and the exploration of different forms of thinking and relating.
3. **Growth:** Due to the endless repetition of the adaptation process, an individual becomes more cognitively complicated, interculturally conscious, and psychologically stronger, eventually becoming more balanced in relation to the surrounding environment, both internal and external.



**Figure 2.** The stress–adaptation–growth dynamic

This upward and cyclical motion is depicted by spiral diagram in the model of Kim. The horizontal axis indicates the time-based growth, and the vertical axis indicates the changing levels of stress and adaptation. Every cycle of the spiral will represent complete stress, adaptation, and further development cycle. The alternating trend indicates how the process of adapting is characterized by regression and progression—people tend to retreat in the face of stress, but then they tend to jump forward in the face of successful coping (Kim, 2001). The spiral grows gradually and upward, and illustrates that each emerging challenge adds to the adaptive space of the individual, leading to the emergence of a higher level of intercultural maturity.

The cyclical nature of the diagram also shows that adaptation is not a lifetime event but a process that must be acquired throughout life. When a person encounters new cultural situations or work difficulties, they are reintroduced into the cycle, and new stressors come out, and new growth is experienced. The amplitude of the oscillations drops as time goes on, which means people are becoming less shaken by cultural differences and more capable of coping with them. This development is an indication of a growing person-environment fit and psychological equilibrium (Kim, 2017).

When considering the experience of international employees working in Finland, the spiral model is an effective way to describe their experience of the adaptation process. When arriving at the Finnish workplace, the staff tends to experience stress because of the language barrier, indirect communication patterns, and the cultural appreciation of being independent and silent (Work in Finland, n.d.). These stressors disrupt the regular tendencies in behavior and generate self-reflection. They learn to adapt to the host environment by means of adaptive learning, e.g., enhancing Finnish or English proficiency, focusing on implicit feedback, and gaining autonomy. With every successful adaptation cycle, they become more interculturally competent and confident and lessen the severity of stress episodes in the future. With time, they undergo development since they internalize the Finnish work ethics, such as punctuality, egalitarianism, and decision-making by consensus, while still preserving their cultural orientation.

The repetitive cycle is an illustration of how Kim defines intercultural transformation, that is, a progressive reorganization of the internal meaning system to fit in new viewpoints. Growth is not on the surface of conformity to behavior but a deeper change of identity and perception of the world. Kim (2017) points out that intercultural development is the process of building a more multi-faceted and inclusive self, which can operate successfully in a variety of cultural situations. To the international professionals in Finland, this metamorphosis is reflected in terms of increased tolerance to ambiguity, multicultural teamwork, empathy, and confidence in navigating Finnish and global professional norms.

The model however also indicates that not all individuals go through the spiral in a smooth manner. Organizational support, leadership inclusiveness, and social networks are some of the factors that influence the adaptation rate and quality greatly (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2017). Workers who continue to be excluded or unrewarded will continue to stay in the lower circles of the spiral, continuously facing stress with no significant improvement. Critically, institutional and societal factors also influence the process of acculturation: organizational policies, inclusion policies at work, and social connections have an

important influence on the extent of the successful adaptation and integration of international employees (Ward and Geeraert, 2016). On the other hand, when employees work in an organization with inclusive leadership and openness, mentoring leaders who facilitate diversity, they are more likely to be engaged and adapt effectively to the workplace environment (Shore et al., 2011).

Overall, the Stress-Adaptation-Growth spiral model created by Kim (2001, 2017) provides a subtle account of how the process of adaptation occurs as a recursive interaction of both challenge and learning. The upward spiral is the continuity and transformation involved in the acculturation process. When considered in the Finnish workplace setting, it emphasizes that the process of adaptation of international employees is a slow and progressive process that depends on the individual and organizational factors. Growth does not arise out of a lack of stress but through the ability to channel stress into intercultural learning, thus gaining an even more integrated sense of self in a multicultural world.

#### **2.1.4 Ward's ABC Model of Acculturation**

The ABC Model of Acculturation as introduced by Ward offers a very sparse but effective way of explaining how individuals adapt to the new cultural setting when they arrive. The model determines adaptation as multi-dimensional and includes three interconnected domains, including affective, behavioral (sociocultural), and cognitive. The affective domain is associated with emotional and psychological well-being, that is, the degree of stress, homesickness, loneliness, and satisfaction with life that migrants or sojourners encounter as they experience cultural discontinuities. The behavioral or sociocultural domain describes the actual skills and behaviors that enable a successful performance in everyday social and employment situations (e.g., conversational routines, meeting norms, and task performance). The cognitive domain is the process of change in beliefs, values, and cultural knowledge and the way individuals learn to comprehend and mentally recreate the host culture and redefine the cultural assumptions that they had initially (Ward et al., 2001). These three spheres strengthen

each other: affective ease results in easier learning of new behaviors; behavioral success may decrease anxiety and therefore results in cognitive openness; and cognitive reframing can cause things that were previously anxiety-provoking to not be threatening. Due to such an integration, the ABC model is also very successful in connecting personal psychological processes to visible behaviors in the workplace and the development of intercultural understanding that facilitates teamwork (Ward et al., 2001; Ward and Geeraert, 2016).

Applying the model to organizational conditions, the model developed by Ward explains why the functioning of teams of international employees depends on more factors than on language skills. Affective adaptation is a predictor of whether new members will be active participants in group work, volunteer ideas, and persevere in the face of initial misunderstandings: employees with high anxiety or low psychological well-being will tend to step out of the group discussion or even social interaction, which consequently leads to less information exchange and cohesion (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2018). Behavioral adaptation takes the practical aspect to workplace integration: one must learn to meet etiquette, meeting feedback norms, role expectations, and task coordination processes to ensure seamless working. As an example, behavioral adaptation in Finland can involve learning to work independently, perceiving pauses and silence in the meeting as thoughtful rather than aggressive, and observing good timekeeping, which has an impact on daily team operations (Work in Finland, n.d.). Cognitive adaptation is reframing and sense-making: once the foreign employees learn the cultural rationale behind Finnish behaviors (e.g., that a lack of small talk is not a personal reserve of aloofness but rather a cultural custom), their interpretation and reaction shift, minimizing conflict and allowing beneficial teamwork (Deardorff, 2006; Ward et al., 2001).

One of the key contributions of the ABC model is that it concentrates on the uniqueness of the three domains of adaptation and the fact that they are mutually reinforcing. According to Searle and Ward (1990), the empirical evidence provided in early studies

established a solid case in favor of this distinction, as personality, coping resources, and social support predicted psychological adaptation, whereas cultural knowledge, host national interaction, and language proficiency predicted sociocultural adaptation. Nevertheless, the two domains have mutual impact: emotional well-being contributes to proactive engagement in the host culture, and successful behavioral adaptation results in confidence and stress alleviation.

The dynamic interplay has been confirmed by later research. Ward and Kennedy (1999) found that psychological distress also declined in both students and professionals who had positive sociocultural learning experiences, such as effective communication, superior knowledge of norms, and increased exposure to the host culture. Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002) also found the same results: that cognitively understanding host-cultural norms reduces conflict and enhances social functioning, which supports the relationship between knowledge, emotional comfort, and behavioral success.

These observations apply in multicultural workplaces such as Finland. Cultural norms that focus on autonomy, low emotional expressiveness, and indirect communication also pose a culture-specific affective threat to international employees joining Finnish organizations, as they experience a sense of loneliness, uncertainty, and anxiety. Lack of emotional well-being can make the newcomers reluctant to engage in meetings and share ideas, which hinders cohesiveness within the team. Simultaneously, sociocultural competencies, including being aware of the purpose of silence, being punctual, and working independently, are the needed skills that will allow an individual to fit into Finnish professional settings (Work in Finland, n.d.). Cognitive adjustment is also equally important: those employees who are aware of Finnish cultural reasoning (e.g., that silence is a sign of thoughtfulness and not disapproval) experience fewer misunderstandings and enhanced cooperation.

Other theories of adaptation can also be incorporated with the ABC model. Similar to Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth model, it also focuses on stress as a learning catalyst. Affective discomfort usually causes behavioral readjustment, which in turn results in cognitive reframing and new emotional balance (Ward and Geeraert, 2016). The multidimensionality of the ABC model also helps to support the acculturation strategies described by Berry (1997): successful integration is based on positive psychological well-being (affective), learning of the needed cultural skills (behavioral), and development of bicultural identity (cognitive).

Importantly, although it has power in its explanations, the ABC model should be used in a sensitive manner to contextual limitations. Ward and Geeraert (2016) warn that psychological and sociocultural adaptation are not solely individual-level processes, but the structural ones, like the language policy, workplace discrimination, and poor access to informal networks, have a significant impact. This brings about the necessity of connecting individual adaptation (ABC) with organizational inclusion practices, and thus the ABC model is an important baseline in the context of comprehending team collaboration in multicultural Finnish workplaces.

In summary, Ward's ABC Model of Acculturation is an effective tool of observation of how international employees in the Finnish working environment adjust emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. Its multidimensional models represent the character of cross-cultural transitions and how psychological well-being, practical cultural skills, and cultural understanding interact to influence collaboration and team performance. To address this thesis, the ABC model would provide critical information on how the issue of adaptation problems arises in multicultural groups and how they interconnect with organizational inclusion climate and communication patterns.

### **2.1.5 Sussman's Cultural Identity Model**

To comprehend the psychological adjustment process and changes in cultural identity, Sussman (2000, 2011) suggests a cultural identity change model that consists of three

key elements that include identity salience, sociocultural adaptation, and self-concept—cultural identity changes during the cultural identity change process. Although previous models like the Berry's Acculturation Model and Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth (SAG) Model concentrate on behavioral, affective, and cognitive changes, the work by Sussman is dedicated to the process of changing the sense of self when they move between cultural settings. Her model was initially created to study the experience of return migration but has been extensively used in the areas of expatriation and sojourner experiences within organizations and the cross-cultural context. It can understand the way individuals reconstruct themselves as they internalize, resist, or reconcile the values of the host culture, which is particularly helpful in analyzing the experiences of international employees who come to work in multicultural working environments such as that experienced in Finland.

Sussman (2000) theorizes the identity change as a dynamic process affected by aspects of culture exposure, affective experience, and self-reflection. The model assumes that people have a cultural identity schema, or mental image of the self, based on the norms and values of the home culture, which may become disordered when they are faced with different cultural systems. This schema can be challenged and reformulated with the exposure to a new cultural setting like the Finnish workplace, which was egalitarian, independent, and marked by low levels of communication. Determined by the degree of identification with the home and host culture, there are four patterns of cultural identity change, which occur when adapting and re-entering: affirmative, subtractive, additive, and intercultural identity responses.

1. **Affirmative Identity:** Individuals who are highly attached to their home culture can maintain their original identity even when they are exposed to the host culture. They change their behavior to be able to work in the new environment, yet they only show emotional and intellectual loyalty to their cultural background. Such a trend may be reflected in the international employees in Finland who may use native communication patterns or social networks but still conform to the

Finnish work norms at the surface. Although the strategy maintains the self consistency, it may restrict the involvement in the Finnish teams and lessen the involvement in the informal cooperation.

2. **Subtractive Identity:** In such cases individuals experience deprivation of home identity without an affirmative identification with the host culture in the strong sense which provokes alienation or marginalization. Such identity dissonance is experienced by international professionals working in Finland who have difficulty with language proficiency or feel like they are being excluded by Finnish-speaking networks. A decrease in psychological well-being and engagement within a team is linked to this response because employees feel culturally in between and disconnected with both the home and the host setting.
3. **Additive Identity:** The individual learns to accept the attributes of the host culture but is strongly connected to the original cultural identity leading to the development of both cultures, bicultural competence. Finland has an additive identity as the international employees become knowledgeable of Finnish social and communication norms, i.e., the importance of punctuality, modesty, independence, etc., without getting rid of their domestic values. Such a balance contributes to the improvement of intercultural communication and teamwork since employees can interpret Finnish and global work norms effectively.
4. **Intercultural Identity:** This is the most transformative response, in which individuals overcome the attachment to single culture and create a flowing and global identity that incorporates several cultural frames. According to Sussman (2011), intercultural identity is an indicator of high levels of intercultural competence and adaptability. To international employees in Finland, an intercultural identity also allows them to negotiate between hybrid work situations, like multinational teams or cross-border projects, with some flexibility, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. It is also consistent with the Finnish focus on

autonomy and equality because these employees build a flexible and inclusive self-concept.

The theory proposed by Sussman can be a valuable addition to the models by Berry and Kim. Whereas Berry emphasizes the acculturation strategies and Kim defines the process of adaptation as the continuous learning process, Sussman explains the internal identity implications of the processes. Incorporated into the Finnish context, the model can be used to clarify the reasons why two equally competent international employees can display varying degrees of engagement, confidence, and cooperation: their level of identity orientation towards the host culture are different.

Moreover, the Cultural Identity Model coincides with the emphasis of the study on working in a team and cooperation. One of the significant places where identity negotiation occurs is team-based spaces. Employees that have attained additive or intercultural identities are more likely to demonstrate more psychological safety, openness to feedback, and mutual respect, which are all critical elements of successful multicultural collaboration (Shore et al., 2018; Stahl et al., 2021). On the other hand, individuals who have subtractive/defensive patterns of identity might have difficulties in participating, leading to a lack of communication or a lack of potential to be innovative. Overall, the Cultural Identity Model by Sussman is a valuable psychological framework to understand cultural adaptation among international employees working in Finnish workplaces. It leads to the fact that adaptation cannot be merely behavioral or cognitive, but is identity-based. Comprehending the processes of identity change can inform organizations to create inclusion strategies that satisfy the external and internal aspects of adjusting to the new environment. To encourage the development of intercultural identity in Finnish employers, inclusive leadership, language support, and cross-cultural mentoring might not only contribute to the well-being of individuals but also to team cohesion and performance of multicultural teams.

**Table 1.** Sussman's Cultural Identity Responses and Their Relevance to Team Collaboration in Finnish Workplaces

<b>Identity Response</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Typical Features in Finnish Workplace Context</b>	<b>Implications for Team Collaboration</b>
Affirmative Identity	Reaffirmation of home culture despite host exposure	Maintains original communication styles; limited engagement in Finnish networks	May cause social distance, reduced informal collaboration, and lower cohesion
Subtractive Identity	Loss of home identity without full host integration	Experiences marginalization; struggles with language and belonging	Leads to disengagement, low motivation, and weakened team synergy
Additive Identity	Incorporation of host cultural elements while retaining home identity	Learns Finnish work norms (e.g., independence, equality) while preserving personal cultural values	Promotes bicultural competence, adaptability and effective teamwork
Intercultural Identity	Transformation toward a global hybrid identity	Displays cultural flexibility and empathy; navigates multicultural contexts smoothly	Enhances creativity, collaboration, and inclusion in diverse teams

### **2.1.6 Cultural Adaptation Theories in the Finnish Workplace: Integration and Evaluation**

The process of cultural adaptation at the Finnish workplace is best explained by the combined use of the major theoretical models that Berry, Kim, Ward, and Sussman have developed. Each of the mentioned frameworks emphasizes very specific but complementary aspects of the adaptation process, such as behavioral strategies, psychological adjustment, communication learning, and identity transformation. In the synthesis, they provide a comprehensive account of how international employees perceive, observe, and react to the challenges of operating in the culturally and organizationally distinct environment of Finland.

Berry's acculturation framework suggests that integration (maintaining the heritage culture when engaging with the host society) can be linked to more favourable adaptation outcomes than the other approaches (Berry, 1997). Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth model describes adaptation as a cyclical and self-renewing learning process: the upward spiral in Kim's model implies progressive intercultural development (Kim, 2017). Ward's ABC model offers a multidimensional framework of studying how emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects interact during the process of adaptation. Sussman's models prove that adaptation is a radical change in self-concept whereby individuals bargain between their home and host cultural frames (Sussman, 2011).

The four theoretical frameworks have been synthesized in table 2 below as per their major perspective, major area of application, complementarities, and areas of divergence. This critical review assists in making a more critical judgment regarding the usefulness of the frameworks and their overall usefulness in this study.

**Table 2.** Comparative Summary of Cultural Adaptation Theoretical Frameworks

Framework	Key Perspective	Primary Field of Application	Complements Other Frameworks	Points of Divergence
Berry (1992, 1997, 2005) Acculturation Model	Individuals choose from four acculturation strategies based on orientation toward home and host cultures.	Cross-cultural psychology; immigration and workplace diversity.	Complements Kim by providing strategic categories for the SAG cycle; aligns with Ward's ABC through linking strategy choice to affective and behavioral outcomes.	Criticized for treating acculturation as individual choice, underweighting structural barriers (Schwartz et al., 2010). Does not account for dynamic identity shifts.
Kim (2001, 2017) Stress–Adaptation–Growth	Adaptation is a continuous, cyclical, upward-spiralling process of stress, learning, and growth leading to intercultural transformation.	Communication and cross-cultural adaptation; sojourner and expatriate research.	Adds temporal, dynamic dimension to Berry's strategies; connects with Ward's affective (stress) and cognitive (growth/reframing) dimensions.	Critiqued for relative optimism about individual resilience, potentially underestimating systemic barriers such as structural discrimination (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Ward et al. (2001) ABC Model	Adaptation is multidimensional, comprising affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions that are mutually reinforcing.	Cross-cultural psychology; sojourner adjustment; workplace integration.	Integrates affective (Kim's stress), behavioral (Berry's strategy enactment), and cognitive (Sussman's identity sense-making) aspects into a unified framework.	Does not fully theorize identity or self-concept changes that accompany adaptation (addressed by Sussman); limited attention to macro-structural constraints.
Sussman (2000, 2011) Cultural Identity Model	Adaptation involves identity transformation: individuals reconstruct self-concept through affirmative, subtractive, additive, or intercultural identity responses.	Expatriate and return migration studies; cross-cultural organizational psychology.	Extends Berry by specifying identity-level outcomes of acculturation strategies; adds depth to Kim's 'growth' phase by explaining what identity transformation means psychologically.	Developed primarily with short-term sojourners and returnees; applicability to long-term international professionals requires further empirical validation.

Combined, the four frameworks provide the adaptation process as a multi-level phenomenon comprising strategic, psychological, communicative, and identity-based aspects. Their synergies are greatest; Berry describes the strategies individuals pursue, Kim describes how these strategies can play out over time, Ward describes the internal

psychological aspects of each phase, and Sussman describes the consequences at the identity level. To study the research topic, the synthesis of the frameworks offers the advantage of a dense analytical focus with the help of which to analyze how international employees in Finnish workplaces experience, navigate, and eventually react to the cultural challenges that they face when collaborating in a team.

Nevertheless, these theories have their limitations even though they are of great value in the application to the Finnish labor context. The acculturation model created by Berry presupposes that individuals choose to make adaptation strategies independently and underestimate the role of institutional power, workplace hierarchies, and language policies as the factors that limit adaptation (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). Although Kim's model highlights the transformative and cyclical process of adaptation, it can also be too optimistic on personal strength and exaggerate the systemic obstacles, e.g., a language barrier or subconscious bias (Ward and Geeraert, 2016). Ward's ABC model is effective, as it incorporates emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects but does not provide a comprehensive mechanism of the interaction between these aspects considering the real organizational limitations (Ward et al., 2001). The models of cultural identity offered by Sussman are insightful to the psychological change, although tested mostly on sojourners, expatriates, and returning migrants; it is not clear as to whether the model is applicable to the long-term international professional. Therefore, although the combined incorporation of these frameworks offers a powerful conceptual background, further research should incorporate policy-level variables like language assistance, credential acknowledgment, and workforce inclusion, which are very crucial in determining the experiences of international workers and their long-term integration in Finland (OECD, 2025; ETLA, 2023).

## **2.2 Cross-Cultural Communication and Intercultural Competence**

Cross-cultural communication (CCC) is one of the key theoretical fields of intercultural research and international management. CCC is the process where individuals of varied cultural backgrounds share information and negotiate meanings where cultural

variations in language, values, communications norms, and behavioral anticipations influence the manner in which messages are produced and interpreted (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst, 2004). Multicultural teamwork in global organizations has become more crucial in terms of innovation and problem-solving, but the differences in communication styles are still a major source of misunderstanding and conflict (Stahl et al., 2010). Therefore, competence in cross-cultural communication is largely viewed as a precursor to effective teamwork, collaboration, and adaptation in a culturally diverse work environment (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

Finland is experiencing a high rate of internationalization of the labor market, which brings opportunities and challenges to the interactions between employees of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Business Finland, 2023). Communication here is much broader than information exchange; it is a social process that is deeply rooted whereby individuals create identities, build relationships, and negotiate meaning. Even minor variations in the communication styles, e.g., tone, directness, silence, norms of feedback, or nonverbal expression, can cause a substantial impact on interpersonal perceptions and team dynamics (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst, 2004). It is therefore necessary to understand such differences in individual and organizational functioning.

The high-context and low-context culture of communication was introduced by Edward T. Hall (1976). In high-context communication, a significant percentage of the meaning is coded in the situational indicators, shared information and other forms of nonverbal communication that would not be decipherable by outsiders. On the contrary, low context communication is based on clear verbal messages, clarity, and direct information exchange, which limit the chance of misunderstanding (Hall, 1976). Finland tends to adhere to a low-context communication style, in which clarity, precision, and straightforwardness are greatly valued. The Finnish working culture is comparatively more focused on equality, directness, and clarity, than small talk or social rituals, and not all Finns feel ashamed of silence and brevity in communication. To illustrate, the guides that explain working life in Finland state that during a meeting, silence can be tolerated

and there can be a pause that is not embarrassing; the employees are not supposed to fill every minute with conversation (TEK, n.d.). Finland has work environments that are usually direct, punctual, and work-focused; bluntness or directness is seen as a virtue rather than being offensive (Business culture, 2025). Nevertheless, to international employees who have a more expressive or high context or collectivistic background, this silence or minimalism can be initially construed as rudeness, exclusion, or uninterest, particularly in group work or a team conference when norms of involvement and feedback vary. Such cultural mismatch and lack of language skills can lead to misunderstanding, and this can become an obstacle to effective cross-cultural communication.

In multicultural Finnish teams, it may be especially difficult to adapt to the situation, and the norms of egalitarian communication may clash with the hierarchical expectations of a new person who has appeared in another culture. Finland has low power distance, and employees are usually encouraged to voice their opinions irrespective of the formal authority (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Finnish organizations are characterized by decision making that tends to be consensus-oriented, and the managers tend to be informal and collaborative instead of using their overt authority to make decisions (Work in Finland, n.d.). International employees who belong to high-context or hierarchical cultures can thus perceive this egalitarianism and informality at first as a form of lack of structure or direction. Gudykunst's (1995, 2005) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory assumes that intercultural interactions might lead to both anxiety and uncertainty that impede the effectiveness of communication. AUM argues that communication among individuals is better achieved when they can control these emotional and cognitive reactions to the best possible levels, and hence this enables individuals to interpret messages correctly and act accordingly in cross-cultural situations. International employees tend to develop more anxiety because of the lack of clear contextual indicators of communication in Finnish workplaces, where communication is frequently nuanced, and feedback is often implied (Gudykunst, 2005; TEK, n.d.). Tolerance to ambiguity, positive interpretation of silence, and positive clarification seeking are thus

essential intercultural competencies in maneuvering in the Finnish organizational environment.

Researchers have developed various models to conceptualize intercultural communication competence (ICC) as a multi-dimensional construct. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) define ICC as communicating effectively and, more importantly, in an appropriate way across the cultural contexts and highlight the fact that competence is a combination of three things that are interrelated and include knowledge, motivation, and skills. Knowledge means cultural awareness and the understanding of their own and other norms, values, and communication practices; motivation means the readiness to interact across cultures despite the potential discomfort; and skills can be regarded as behavioral abilities that should help the individual to engage in communication respectfully and constructively. In addition to this, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence assumes that the internal dimensions are dynamically connected with each other, yet the external outcomes are effective communication and meaningful relationships. Deardorff has reminded us that intercultural competence is created through the continuous process of reflection, adaptation, and feedback and not through one-time training.

The study on cross-cultural communication has focused more on intercultural competence as a multidimensional skill that assists individuals to communicate and conduct themselves effectively and adequately in culturally diverse situations. Among the most developed models is the model of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), which was created by Ang, Van Dyne, and Rockstuhl (2015) and where intercultural effectiveness is also conceptualized as the combination of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral pieces. CQ is defined as the ability of an individual to operate successfully in a culturally diverse situation and has four dimensions: metacognitive CQ, which refers to the awareness and control of cultural assumptions; cognitive CQ, which describes the knowledge of cultural norms and use; motivational CQ, which represents the interest and confidence in intercultural interaction; and behavioral CQ, which describes the ability to adapt verbal

and nonverbal behavior in response to cultural changes. With the Finnish working context traditionally being low-power distance, flat organizational structures, and direct communication culture ( Hofstede et al. 2010), intercultural competence is especially significant in facilitating effective teamwork among culturally diverse employees (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

The growing trend of digital and hybrid work environments has created even more challenges to cross-cultural communication in Finnish workplaces. Although remote and hybrid employment has been widespread throughout Europe, recent statistics show that these practices are on the downward trend in 2024, and more individuals are going back to the office, although telework remains popular (Eurofound, 2025). The Finnish culture of minimal communication-efficiency and brevity can also further dehumanize international employees with particular reference to relation-oriented countries that apply informal social interaction as a trust building technique. Such ambiguity may be even more problematic in the case of international employees, especially those ones belonging to high-context or relationship-oriented cultures. Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory highlights that the effectiveness of intercultural communication depends on the individuals' ability to manage uncertainty and anxiety as well as the significance of strategies aimed at deciphering nonverbal cues and clarifying the meaning in a diverse team. Neeley (2021) states that remote and hybrid working presuppose the management of the communication channels, trust, and team collaboration because the absence of face-to-face communication may result in misunderstandings, diminished involvement, and decreased cohesion among team members. Organizations in Finland that actively tend to establish intercultural digital competence, such as tone, clarity, and feedback guidelines, have been more successful in hiring international staff. This trend is a pointer to the fact that intercultural communication is increasingly becoming a human skill and a technological skill.

Communication competence and effective team collaboration development have received a significant amount of research in organizational behavior literature.

Multicultural teams have the potential to produce process gains, including creativity, innovation, and wider perspectives, and process losses, including conflict, miscommunication, and cohesion (Stahl et al., 2010). Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, and Homan (2004) suggest that cultural diversity in teams can result in performance gains due to the improved information sharing and integration of different perspectives, while the Social Categorization Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) emphasizes that visible differences can result in in-group/out-group differences, and this hinders collaboration. These dynamics can be observed in the Finnish workplaces, where language and culture barriers may restrict the involvement of international employees in informal networks where important information and confidence are exchanged. According to Shumilova, Cai, and Pekkola (2012), international graduates in Finland tend to experience difficulties in their employment integration, with the barriers to it being partly based on the language and network aspects. Consequently, intercultural competence with the help of inclusive communication practices is necessary so that the diversity of the workforce can be transformed into synergy to provide effective cooperation and exploit the potential of multicultural teams.

These theoretical knowledge findings are justified by empirical evidence of Finnish organizations. Research discovered that despite the fact that Finnish work culture (low hierarchies, supervisors being approachable, and trust) is valued by foreign employees, they tend to find it challenging when starting a career (Business Finland, 2023). The language barrier, inadequate understanding of workplace norms, and vague employment conditions could lead to misunderstanding and inability to become an effective team member (Shumilova et al., 2012). The new entrants might not be able to decipher indirect messages or limited social contact, which impacts their self-esteem and interest. However, communication competence is an ongoing process: international employees can become increasingly tolerant of ambiguity, empathy, and self-efficacy over time with the help of structured support, such as mentorship, peer networks, and intercultural training, and this eventually leads to improvements in overall performance (Deardorff, 2006; Gudykunst, 2004). Inclusive leadership is very crucial in designing this

developmental process. The leaders who demonstrate cultural intelligence, transparency, and openness minimize the anxiety and ambiguity that hinder communication. Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv (2010) discovered that inclusive leadership creates psychological safety situations in which individuals feel safe enough to share their ideas without any fear of unfavorable criticism. Based on this understanding, inclusive leadership and organizational engagement towards inclusion would be viewed as key towards turning workforce diversity into a strategic asset of collaboration, innovation, and well-being rather than a potential liability.

To conclude, cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence are dynamic and multi-dimensional constructs that determine the processes of adaptation and collaboration at the individual level and the organizational level. In the case of international employees in Finland, language is not enough in successful communication; rather, it involves understanding silence, interpreting directness, and egalitarian values. In the case of Finnish organizations, success is achieved through the establishment of a workplace that promotes lifelong learning, open communication, and providing clear feedback. When the two parties are involved in this two-way process, then cultural diversity proves to be an asset rather than a barrier. Finally, intercultural competence is the communicative basis of adaptation, which allows foreign professionals not just to work in but also to excel in the growing and more diverse global workplaces in Finland.

### **2.3 Organizational Inclusion and Leadership in Multicultural Contexts**

The concept of organizational inclusion is the structural and cultural intermediary between the individual level of cultural adaptation (cultural adjustment) and teamwork. Although the previous parts of this chapter examined the processes of individual adaptation that were psychological, behavioral, and based on identities, the current section involves the institutional and leadership aspects that influence the processes. Inclusion, rather than diversity, extends beyond representations of nationalities or ethnic groups in numbers and implies the development of an environment where every employee feels respected, valued, and empowered to make a significant contribution to

organizational objectives (Shore et al., 2018). In multicultural Finnish workplaces, where the workforce is definitely becoming more internationalized because of demographic shifts and skilled labor gaps (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024), inclusion serves as the determining factor between cultural diversity creating innovation and causing fragmentation and team dysfunction.

Low power distance, high individualism, and a high focus on equality and trust define the Finnish workplace culture (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Though such values encourage equality and sovereignty, they also might lead to a paradox in which international employees would face an unseen barrier because they are not aware of the implicit communication norms and expectations regarding independence, initiative, and silence in the work environment (Work in Finland, n.d.). It does not just mean learning Finnish or getting used to punctuality, but a matter connected with attaining relational inclusion in teams in which international employees are not simply present but also psychologically involved and socially acknowledged (Shore et al., 2018; Work in Finland, n.d.). Organizational inclusion, social capital, and leadership theories offer a holistic approach to the dynamics of these processes as well as to the identification of viable strategies that may be used to promote cross-cultural collaboration.

The inclusion framework of Shore et al. (2018) is considered the foundation of modern inclusion research. It defines inclusion as how much individuals have a sense of belonging and uniqueness in the organizational life. Belongingness means feeling accepted, interrelated, and supported, whereas uniqueness is a representation of the importance assigned to the unique views and contributions. It is the connection between the two dimensions that contribute to psychological safety the belief that a person can share ideas, concerns and identities without being vulnerable to being subjected to negative consequences (Carmeli et al. 2010). Although it might seem that belongingness in Finnish workplaces is ensured by egalitarianism and flat hierarchies, numerous international employees complain that they are not integrated into informal social circles or receive nonverbal feedback with subtle signals, which causes isolation even in

organizations that introduce equality (Shumilova et al., 2012; Business Finland, 2023). This paradox is clarified by the model proposed by Shore because it shows that it is impossible to achieve inclusion only through structural fairness, as it entails ongoing interpersonal communication and valuing diversity as an asset.

The social capital theories (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986) of this psychological background provide a structural explanation of the notion of inclusion by incorporating the idea of how access to networks, trust, and shared norms determine the opportunities of participation. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the stock of actual or potential resources, which are bound to the ownership of the enduring web of institutionalized relationships. The social capital in workplaces comes in form of informal access to information, mentoring, and access to influence. Nevertheless, such networks may be characterized by reproduction of inequality since newcomers, particularly those who have little command of a language or local connections, do not have access points to mainstream professional networks. This difference between bonding and bridging capital in Putnam (2000) is especially applicable to multicultural teams because bonding capital was described as linking individuals within the same group (e.g., co-nationals or linguistic communities), whereas bridging capital links across divides and allows integration and cooperation. Bonding capital among the Finnish employees in organizations may maintain their efficiency and trust among them without intentionally locking off foreign workers from knowledge sharing and progression. Inclusion programs, which constructively build bridging social capital (via mentoring programmes, cross cultural workshops, and peer collaboration systems) are thus important to equitable team operations.

Cultural dimensions have also been linked closely with social capital as it defines how networks, trust and access to resources work in national cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Low power distance and high individualism in Finland imply that there is even distribution of authority and employees are expected to take initiative. Nevertheless, the same aspects can be a challenge to individuals of high power-distance or collectivist

societies, whereby respect for rank and interdependence through relations shapes behavior (Hofstede Insights, 2023). In an example, an international employees accustomed to working under direct supervision might perceive Finnish autonomy as being indifferent on the side of the manager, and Finnish employees may perceive reserved communication as a lack of interest. Such cultural misalignments can lead to a decrease in the team cohesion and misunderstandings unless inclusive leadership is provided to explicitly explain norms, expectations, and feedback processes.

The analysis is further elaborated with the help of the model of organizational culture suggested by Schein and Schein (2016), which separates artifacts (observable practices and behaviors), espoused values (formulated ideals), and basic underlying assumptions (unconscious beliefs that influence action). Equal pay systems and consensus-based decision-making are structural artifacts in Finnish organizations, which carry with them espoused values of transparency and equality. However, the international employees can meet systematic obstacles concealed in the underlying assumptions that all employees are included and supported by default. These obstacles may be frequently determined by the unwritten cultural rules and assumptions and require active inclusion, mentoring, and culturally sensitive leadership (Business Finland, 2023). Inclusion is a presumption that is not required to be exercised, i.e. unconscious bias still persists within the recruitment, communication and promotion processes. Using Schein's framework at the Finnish workplaces, there is an important discovery that to be able to create an inclusive workplace, it is important to expose and revisit these suppressed assumptions in the workplace via reflective leadership and ongoing cultural learning.

Inclusive theories of leadership provide effective ways of converting these organizational ideals into practice. Carmeli et al. (2010) define inclusive leadership as the behavior that makes every employee feel respected, engaged and enabled to contribute meaningfully to the performance of the group. Inclusive leaders also exhibit openness, approachability, and responsiveness by getting different views in seeking diverse opinions, being accessible, and responsive to the needs of employees. They establish a culture of

psychological safety where differences in culture become learning content rather than a conflict (Nishii, 2013). Inclusive leadership in the Finnish workplace entails explicitizing the implicit expectations to get international employees oriented through the cultural norms and team practices. As an illustration, the leaders can simplify the decision-making processes, describe the feedback, and personally encourage the quieter team members to engage, which will help to eliminate misunderstandings and assist them in becoming part of the team (Business Finland, 2023).

Empirical research indicates that inclusive leadership does not only increase collaboration within the team but also boosts innovation and retention of employees. To illustrate, Li and Tang (2022) discovered that inclusive leadership has a positive influence on the innovation in teams by establishing a sense of psychological safety when employees feel secure enough to exchange ideas and take interpersonal risks. Similarly, Fu et al. (2022) demonstrated that inclusive leaders leading through example and exhibiting curiosity, fairness, and empathy motivate employees to perceive diversity as sources of creative resources rather than a misconception. Inclusive leadership is very important in Finland to overcome social isolation that international professionals sometimes feel when they are in homogenous workgroups (Shore et al., 2018; Shumilova et al., 2012). Curiosity, empathy, and fairness are examples of leadership behaviors that can be modeled by leaders to convert the diversity present in the workplace into a creative synergy rather than a misunderstanding.

The institutional and national-level organizations are critical towards promoting workplace inclusion in a systemic sense. The Talent Boost Programme (2023-2027) is one significant policy-level intervention in Finland that can help enhance international recruitment, facilitate integration, and enhance the retention of foreign talent in the long term in response to demographic change and labor shortages (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024). Other more feasible programs such as Work in Finland and Regional Talent Hubs provide assistance to foreign employees by guiding them through employers, onboarding, language acquisition, and networking international

talent and Finnish jobs. Collectively, these actions are indicators of an increased realization on the institutional level that effective inclusion means a concerted effort between the government, employers, educational institutions, and municipalities.

With all these structural improvements, there are empirical indications that there is a wide gap between employment and meaningful workplace inclusion. Research findings show that the majority of international professionals are able to secure jobs, yet they less often have an opportunity to build their careers, engage, and be acknowledged in the working communities (Business Finland, 2023; OECD, 2025). The challenges are often not limited to the onboarding stage but continue to be evident in the daily workplace interactions, which include exclusion by the informal communication, limited access to mentoring, and underrepresentation in the decision-making procedures (Business Finland, 2023; Shore et al., 2018). These obstacles are especially intense in smaller organizations where Finnish or Swedish is the primary language of communication in the workplace, and the concept of inclusion is more about the relationships within a team rather than the equality or legal position.

The information provided by Business Finland (2023) supports the given distinction between formal diversity policies and lived experiences of inclusion further. Though the Finnish employers believe that their working environments are welcoming and inclusive to others, international employees tend to report a lower feeling of belonging and appreciation. Personal considerations in the context of the Work in Finland and Talent Boost underline that diversity cannot be narrowed to the hiring of international employees or the use of the English language as a working language; rather, active incorporation into an organizational culture, common standards, and social interactions should achieve the real inclusion. Thus, workplace inclusion in Finland seems to be less institutionalized and more determined by leadership practices, patterns of interaction in a team, and day-to-day practices that facilitate or restrict the sense of belonging among international employees.

Combining these theoretical and empirical views, it is evident that the concept of inclusion is a multilevel phenomenon that consists of psychological, interpersonal, and structural levels. Inclusion at a psychological level brings a sense of belonging and authenticity; at an interpersonal level, it creates a sense of communication and working together; and at a structural level, it entails fair access to opportunities and representation. The interaction between these levels determines the success of cultural adaptation of international employees in Finland. Even when people can be linguistically and culturally adjusted, it might be difficult to adjust when organizational standards are presupposed to be monocultural implicitly. On the other hand, inclusive leadership would help to bridge these layers where empathy is complemented by strategic equity programs, and multicultural teams are more unified and innovative. It is not, however, just an adaptation by-product but also its facilitator, and it transforms diversity into collaborative advantage.

Finally, the Finnish case highlights a paradox, which states that even the society being glorified as equal might fail to be inclusive when equality is understood as being the same. Being included does not imply that difference should be eradicated but being recognized. This distinction has its implications, especially in team collaboration, where innovation involves the integration of different perspectives and not compliance with the same expectation. According to Shore et al. (2018), actual inclusion strikes the right balance between belonging and uniqueness by enabling people to feel as if they are accepted and express their unique identities. In the Finnish workplaces, it is the creation of environments where silence could be in coexistence with expression, autonomy with guidance, and equality with empathy. When these conditions overlap, the international employees can transcend the adaptation into active participation and also contribute not only to their work but also to the creativity, perspectives, and cultural intelligence. In this way, inclusion comes out as the product and the source of successful multicultural teamwork—a crucial support of the changing global workforce in Finland.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

This research uses a combined theoretical framework to analyze the impact of cultural adaptation challenges on teamwork and collaboration among international employees in the Finnish workplaces. The framework unites four different complementary approaches towards the concept of adaptation: Berry's acculturation model (1992, 1997, 2005), Kim's stress-adaptation-growth model (2001, 2017), Ward's ABC model of adaptation (2001), and Sussman's cultural identity model (2000, 2011). These theories are combined with two organizational-level concepts — cross-cultural communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Deardorff, 2006) and inclusive leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010; Shore et al., 2018) — in order to explain how individual adaptation experiences are translated into team-level outcomes.

The framework starts with the assumption that cultural adaptation within the workplace is not a one-time process, but a dynamic and multidimensional process. The international employees can face language, communication norms, autonomy, silence, feedback practices, and informal networking related challenges in the Finnish work environment (Hall, 1976; Hofstede et al., 2010; TEK, n.d.). These challenges become the point of departure of the framework since they influence the way employees perceive and react to the new work environment. This is the link between the Finnish Work Context and the Cultural Adaptation Challenges in the framework: it is precisely the specific features of Finnish workplace culture that generate the particular adaptation difficulties experienced by international employees.

On the initial level of analysis, the acculturation model by Berry (Berry, 1992, 1997) clarifies the general orientation employees adopt towards adaptation. Based on the relationship of the individuals to the original culture and the host culture, individuals can either drift to assimilation, separation, integration, or marginalization. The most constructive strategy in the context of teamwork is integration since it enables the employees to be active participants in the host work environment and retain their own cultural identity. This implies that the relationship between the two issues of adaptation

and teamwork is partially determined by the type of acculturation strategy that employees can or are willing to embrace.

At the second level, the model of stress-adaptation-growth that is developed by Kim (2001, 2017) reflects how the adaptive process occurs over time. According to the framework, initially, cultural challenges produce stress, which may be uncertainty, low confidence, or difficulty in communication. With some time, through repetition, learning, and encouragement, the employees might shift to adaptation and, ultimately, development, in terms of the increased intercultural competence and improved participation at the place of work. The connection here is thus temporal and developmental: initial adaptation challenges do not always render collaboration indefinite, but they may undermine the teamwork until the time when the employees are able to learn and adapt.

On the third level, the ABC model developed by Ward (Ward et al., 2001) describes the internal dimensions in which adaptation influences the interaction at the workplace. Affective adaptation determines the emotional comfort and the desire to interact with the colleagues; behavioral adaptation determines the ability to behave in a culturally relevant manner within a team; and cognitive adaptation helps to comprehend the norms, expectations, and communication styles at the workplace. The cascading nature of these three dimensions indicates the empirically determined result of Ward et al. (2001) according to which these three dimensions are sequentially and mutually reinforcing: affective discomfort is considered to be the precursor of behavioral adjustment, which in its turn leads to cognitive reframing. All these three dimensions are directly related to cultural adaptation to teamwork since emotional strain, improper behavioral responses, or misunderstanding of norms may decrease participation, trust, and coordination in teams.

On the fourth level, Sussman cultural identity model (2000, 2011) explains using an identity-based explanation. Adaptation is not just a matter of learning new behaviors

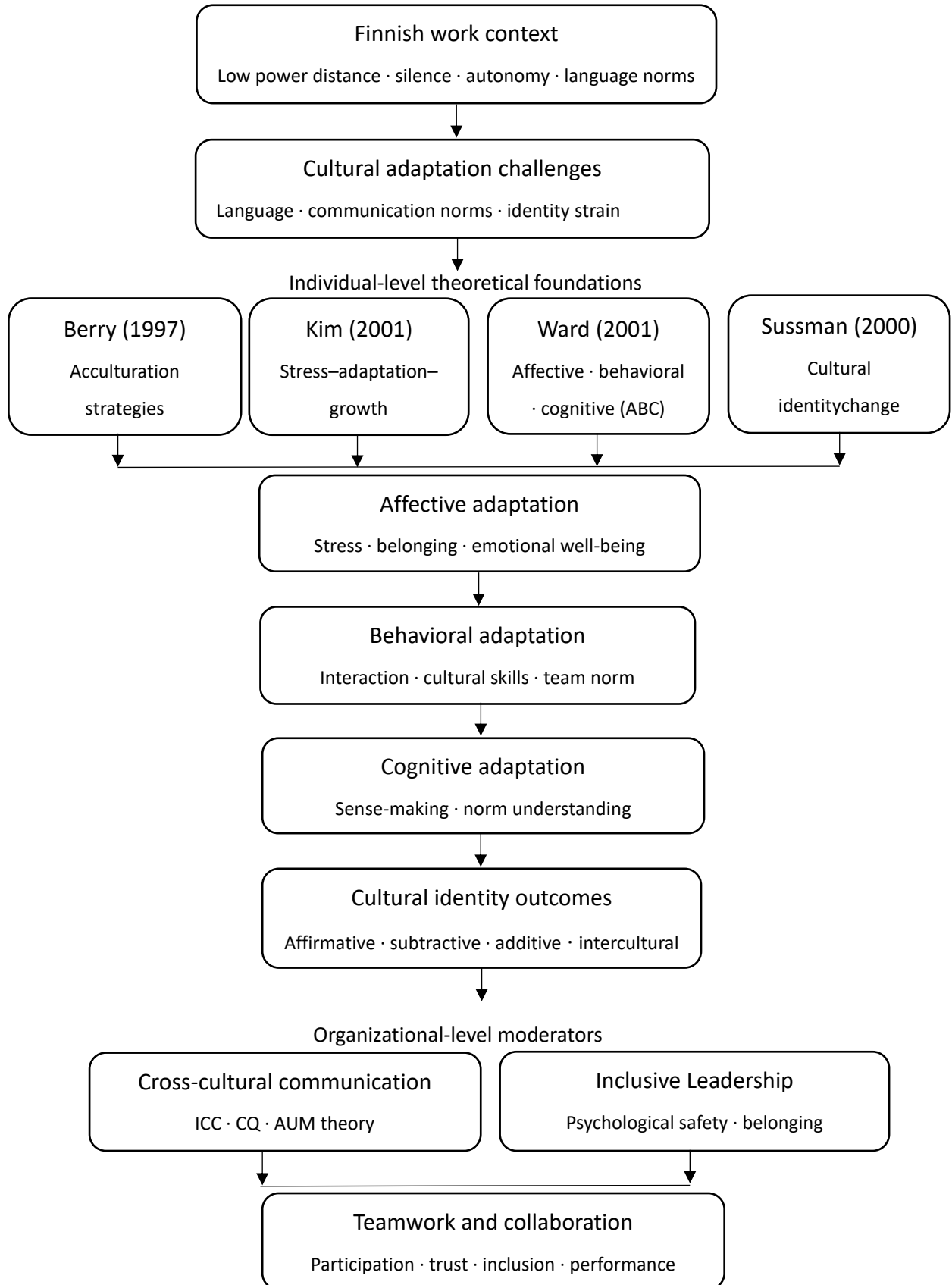
but also a matter of self-concept change. By creating an additive or intercultural identity response, employees might be more apt to cross-cultural bridging and cross-cultural working with differences, unlike subtractive or defensive responses, which lead to withdrawal, insecurity, or disengagement. This implies that identity transformation acts as a valuable connection between adaptation experience and collaboration quality.

The four theoretical views are linked to the conditions at the organizational level, which either alleviate or exacerbate adaptation challenges. Cross-cultural communication competence (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009; Deardorff, 2006) can enhance clarity, understanding, and shared knowledge in this framework, and inclusive leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010; Shore et al., 2018) facilitates psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and diversity awareness. All of these factors never substitute individual adaptation processes; they mediate and moderate the relationship between the challenges of adaptation and the outcome of teamwork. Stated differently, communication practices and leadership behaviors within organizations may either assist employees to progress towards successful adaptation or strengthen the issue of exclusion and collaboration.

The final outcome of the framework is expressed in terms of teamwork and collaboration, including participation, trust, communication quality, knowledge sharing, and inclusion in team processes. The framework thus postulates the following reasoning: the challenges of cultural adaptation affect the psychological, behavioral, cognitive, and identity-related changes of employees; these changes are conditioned by the communication and leadership practices in organizations; and a combination of these factors determines the quality of work and collaboration in multicultural Finnish workplaces.

This framework fills a research gap in the literature by connecting theories on individual adaptation to the organizational inclusion and communication processes. Adaptation has been discussed at the policy level or in multicultural teamwork without adequate

integration of identity theory, communication, and adaptation theory, which have been discussed in the previous studies. Integrating these views, the present study provides a more detailed foundation for the analysis of how international employees perceive teamwork at Finnish workplaces and what organizations may do to enhance the integration of inclusive and collaborative multicultural teams. This gap directly corresponds to the research gap identified in Chapter 1 in that even though the policy-level integration in Finland has been researched, the organizational and team-level processes by which cultural adaptation challenges inform day-to-day collaboration are not empirically explored (Shumilova et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2021).



**Figure 3.** Theoretical Framework

### **3 Research Methodology**

The chapter introduces the methodological framework that is used to answer the research question: how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration among international employees in Finnish workplaces. It includes a comprehensive explanation of the research approach, sampling process, data collection, data analysis, and standards applied in ensuring the quality and trustworthiness of the study. All of these methodological choices are generally aligned with the research objectives introduced in Chapter 1 and the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

To address the research question, this study has opted for a qualitative research approach to examine how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration among international employees in Finnish workplaces. Qualitative design is suitable, since the purpose of the research is to have in-depth explanation of the participants' experience, perceptions, and interpretations of the people in the organizational and cultural settings. Qualitative research is particularly suitable in cases where the aim is to comprehend complex social phenomena, as well as the meaning to which individuals assign their experiences (Puusa & Juuti, 2020).

The research study is based on an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is a theoretical assumption that social reality is not objective and fixed; rather, it is created by individual experiences and social interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This perspective is particularly relevant to the study, as cultural adaptation and teamwork are socially constructed processes that are influenced by communication patterns and organizational culture and values. Therefore, an interpretive approach allows one to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding about the way international employees perceive and interpret their workplace experiences in Finland.

An exploratory research design is applied, as there is inadequate research specifically addressing issues related to the relationship between cultural adaptation challenges and teamwork within Finnish organizational contexts. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the analysis aims at exploring the individual experiences of participants and finding patterns and themes in their narratives (Kananen, 2019). This approach underpins the creation of context-specific understanding about the dynamics of multicultural workplaces.

The method of analysis used in this research was largely inductive and data-driven; that is, the patterns and meanings generated by the research procedure are a result of responses by the participants rather than an imposition of some theoretical groups. Nonetheless, as the theoretical framework offered in Chapter 2 (some aspects such as cultural adaptation, communication styles, and identity transformation) also affected the analysis, the approach can be further described as abductive: as the new patterns in the data were identified, they were interpreted in discussion with the theoretical concepts, although they were also receptive to informational additions that were not part of the theoretical frameworks. This renders the results data-driven and theoretical.

A qualitative approach is assumed to be more suitable than a quantitative design to conduct this study. Whereas quantitative research is based on measurement of variables and provision of results that can be generalized, the present study aims to help fix intricate and context-specific experiences that cannot be fully understood only by numerical data. Therefore, the qualitative method has an advantage in giving a richer and more detailed exploration of the research problem.

The semi-structured interview method was chosen as primary data collection method. This method supports the research objective by encouraging flexibility in the interview process while ensuring that key themes that have been derived from the research questions and theoretical framework are addressed consistently. A semi-structured interview also offers a way for the participants to express their experience in their own

words, while the researcher can ask follow-up questions and seek clarification where necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Overall, the chosen research approach is consistent with the objective of developing a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of cultural adaptation and teamwork in multicultural Finnish workplaces.

### **3.2 The Sample**

The study focuses on international employees working in Finnish organizations. Ten participants were taken in total, and they all have firsthand experience working in Finland in a multicultural team environment. The participants are of various cultural and national backgrounds, which enables the study to capture a wide range of opinions on cultural adaptation and work in teams.

The purposive sampling strategy was used to identify the participants who would offer pertinent and informative information on the research problem. This approach is appropriate in qualitative research, as it allows the selection of individuals based on their knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research, the inclusion criteria were based on the following parameters:

- Be international employees (non-Finnish origin)
- Have work experience in Finland
- Be actively involved in team-based work environments

One of the strengths of the sample is its cultural and national diversity. The participants belong to different cultural backgrounds, which include various regions like Asia, Europe, Africa and so on. This variety is specifically significant when it comes to the research question because cultural adaptation experiences are conditioned by the difference in cultural norms, communication style, and expectations towards teamwork and hierarchy.

Besides national diversity, the participants differ in:

- Length of residence in Finland (from the recent arrival to multiple years of experience)
- Professionals (e.g., specialists, team members or leaders, service employees):
- Organizational and industrial contexts.

This difference helps the study to identify both similarities and situational differences in the experience of cultural adaptation challenges and their impact on teamwork and collaboration.

The recruitment procedure entailed contacting over 20 prospective participants via various communication methods, and that included email, telephone, and individual and professional networks. However, only ten individuals agreed to participate in the study. This represents a typical constraint of qualitative research, as participation is voluntary and relies on the availability and willingness of individuals to participate. Nonetheless, it was deemed that the sample size was adequate since recurring themes started to emerge during the interviews, meaning that the dataset was sufficient for the aims of this study. (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research is focused on depth and not breadth. Therefore, a smaller sample size can be appropriate when it allows for detailed exploration of participants' experiences (Puusa & Juuti, 2020). The ten respondents in this research gave valuable and deep information, and it was possible to analyze cultural adaptation and teamwork dynamics using this information comprehensively.

The decision to interview international employees also reveals the purpose of the study which is to analyze the aspect of adaptation through the lens of the view of those undergoing the transition to the Finnish working life directly. Simultaneously, this option does not mean that challenges of integration are presented solely by the employee component; employer views would offer a valuable complementary aspect, but they are

not the focus of the current study and thus are proposed to be considered in subsequent research.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the research prior to the interviews. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. To protect the anonymity of the study participants, the participants will be identified through the use of pseudonyms or coded identifiers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) when the results are reported. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the form of data collection because of their flexibility and the ability to consider complex social phenomena. Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between consistency and flexibility because they have preset questions and at the same time give the researcher a chance to modify the phrasing, order, and depth of questioning in the interview process (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This would allowed participants to describe their experiences using their own words, and the researcher can use this as an opportunity to ask questions and make further inquiries where needed.

The interview guide was constructed based on the research objectives (Chapter 1) and theoretical framework (Chapter 2). Particularly, it included themes associated with:

- Cultural adaptation processes
- Communication styles and challenges
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Inclusion and belonging
- Coping strategies and identity development

- Organizational support

**Table 3. Interview Themes and Their Connection to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework**

<b>Interview Theme</b>	<b>Research Question Addressed</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework Link</b>	<b>Example Question Asked</b>
Cultural adaptation processes	Main RQ; Sub-question a	Berry (1997): acculturation strategies; Kim (2001): SAG phases; Ward et al. (2001): affective and cognitive dimensions	What aspects did you find most challenging when starting in Finland?
Communication styles and challenges	Main RQ; Sub-question a	Hall (1976): high/low-context; Gudykunst (2005): AUM theory; Deardorff (2006): intercultural competence	Have you experienced misunderstandings with colleagues? What caused them?
Teamwork and collaboration	Main RQ — directly	Stahl et al. (2010, 2021): multicultural team dynamics; Shore et al. (2018): inclusion and belonging	How would you describe teamwork and collaboration in your team?
Inclusion and belonging	Main RQ; Sub-question a	Shore et al. (2018): belonging and uniqueness; Putnam (2000): bridging social capital; Nishii (2013): psychological safety	Do you feel included as an equal member of your team?
Coping strategies and identity development	Main RQ; Sub-question b	Sussman (2000, 2011): cultural identity responses; Kim (2001): growth phase of SAG spiral	Has your way of working or communicating changed over time?

Organizational support	Sub-question b	Carmeli et al. (2010): inclusive leadership; Shore et al. (2018): inclusion framework	What could organizations do better to support international employees?
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Before the interviews, participants were given a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form that contained information on the purpose of the study, their role in the research, ethical considerations, and data handling procedures. The interview questions were also shared in advance to help participants prepare and feel more comfortable during the interview process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted.

The interviews were organized over multiple weeks, either online (via Microsoft Teams or Zoom) or face-to-face, depending on participants' preferences. All interviews were conducted in English, as the participants were comfortable communicating in this language. Each interview lasted less than 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure quality data collection. Recording the interviews allowed the researcher to focus on the interaction rather than on extensive note-taking during the discussion.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim after the interviews. Transcription is one of the most important stages of qualitative research because it allows for conducting a systematized analysis while at the same time saving the original meanings that the participants convey. The researcher perused through the transcripts and corrected where needed to achieve accuracy and completeness.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

This research paper used a qualitative method of data analysis in interpreting the data collected using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most suitable approach given the exploratory nature of the research study and the fact that it

involves gaining insights into the lived experiences of the participants. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical technique that helps to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data and conduct a rich, detailed interpretation of complex phenomena in the social world (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### **3.4.1 Rationale for Thematic Analysis**

The purpose of the research choice of a thematic analysis was motivated by the fact that the research objective is to study how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration among international employees in Finnish workplaces. Since the research does not aim for measurable variables but concentrates on the perceptions, meanings, and experiences of the participants, the thematic analysis demonstrates a flexible but systematic method of the organization and interpretation of qualitative data.

Thematic analysis can be especially associated with the interpretivist research paradigm that is selected in the given study, because it enables the researcher to interpret actively how people form meaning based on their experiences. It allows the researcher to examine the explicit experiences, including the communication problems, and the underlying meanings, including feelings of exclusion or identity negotiation, which are the focus of the research. Notably, thematic analysis enables the findings to be explained within the context of the theoretical framework used in Chapter 2, such as the concepts of cultural adaptation, communication, and identity. This renders the analysis descriptive as well as informed theoretically.

#### **3.4.2 Analytical Approach**

The analysis of the data in this study was an inductive and data-driven approach, which implies that the patterns and meanings produced by the study are the results of participants' responses and not the results of the application of the existing theories. This method enables the researcher to record natural experiences and not to confine the

analysis to predetermined categories. Even though the analysis was mainly inductive, existing literature on cultural adaptation and teamwork was used to inform the analysis. This combination made the analysis stay grounded in the data as well as be theoretically meaningful. This practice renders the findings more pertinent and profound.

### **3.4.3 Phase of Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data through the six-phase model of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) providing a more systematic and yet flexible method of identifying and interpreting themes in qualitative data. This framework was very appropriate in this study, as it allowed analyzing the participants' experience systematically regarding the research question on how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration in Finnish workplaces.

#### **Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data**

The initial phase entailed familiarity with the data at an extreme level. The researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Moreover, the audio recordings coupled with the transcripts helped to have a deeper involvement with the data, as they captured tone, emphasis, and contextual nuances. The preliminary observations and considerations were recorded at this stage, especially focusing on recurrent thoughts and meaningful quotes in connection with cultural adaptation and the experience of teamwork.

#### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

The second phase entailed the systematic coding of the data. Coding refers to the process of identifying and labeling meaningful segments of data that are relevant to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding has been performed manually to be close and detailed in interaction with the data. Some of the first codes were language barriers, communication challenges, feeling excluded, team support, and adaptation

strategies. These codes are the direct reflection of the crucial aspects of the participants' experience concerning cultural differences, communication, and collaboration.

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

The third phase involved sorting the codes into larger themes by the researcher. Codes with similar meanings were grouped together to form initial themes. As an example, the codes concerning language challenges and misunderstandings were lumped into a bigger theme like communication barriers. In a similar manner, codes that dealt with inclusion, participation, and team relationships were grouped into themes like workplace inclusion and team dynamics. This stage was characterized by the shift of descriptive encoding to a more interpretative form of analysis.

### **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

The fourth phase entailed examining and narrowing down the identified themes to ascertain their internal consistency and overall coherence. This involved determining whether the data contained in each theme was a meaningful and consistent pattern, and it also involved making sure that the themes were distinctly different. Broad themes were broken down into sub-themes, and those with inadequate supporting data were either edited or eliminated. Significantly, this stage also entailed considering how the identified themes can be related to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

In the fifth phase, each theme was clearly defined and named. The researcher identified the core meaning of each theme and examined how it contributes to understanding the research problem. Detailed descriptions were formulated to describe what each theme entails and how it is relevant to cultural adaptation challenges and teamwork dynamics. Sub-themes were also determined where necessary to gain a more detailed perspective of the participants' experiences.

## **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The last phase was to incorporate the themes into a coherent and structured narrative, which was delivered in Chapter 4. Direct quotations of participants support the findings and demonstrate the main points as well as increase the transparency and credibility of the analysis. Presenting the findings in participants' own words shows that they are based on the data and that the findings have high empirical grounds to support the interpretations done.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is a crucial aspect to determine the rigor and credibility of the findings. This study follows the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, to ensure the quality of the analysis.

#### **1. Credibility**

Credibility is a measure that indicates the extent to which the findings are a true reflection of how the participants experienced it. The credibility in this study was boosted by the extended exposure to the data, which was achieved by reading the transcripts multiple times, as well as formal coding. Direct quotations have been used in the findings, further enhancing the credibility because the evidence is transparent to demonstrate the way the interpretations are based on the participants' perspectives.

#### **2. Dependability**

Dependability can be described as the reliability and consistency of the research process. In this study, a systematic and transparent approach was followed throughout the data analysis. The application of the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) made certain that the analysis was carried out in a systematic and replicable manner. The next point that proves the reliability of the study is the clear documentation of each phase of the analysis.

### 3. Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the participants influence the findings instead of researcher bias. The researcher took a reflexive stance during the analysis, making sure that he/she recognizes his/her own assumptions and strives to interpret the information in an objective manner. Verbatim transcripts and the use of participant quotes also contribute to confirmability by showing that results are based on the information.

### 4. Transferability

Transferability is a term used to identify the degree to which the results can be generalized to different settings. Although the study is context-specific to Finnish workplaces, offering descriptive and profound data of the participants, settings, and experiences allows readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to other multicultural work environments.

## **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

This study also adhered to ethical principles during the research process, as defined by the principles of responsible research conduct outlined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). Since this study entails qualitative interviews with adult participants on workplace experiences, it qualifies as low-risk human participant research; however, all the usual ethical guidelines were followed in the entire data collection and analysis process.

All participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form prior to the interviews, which clearly explained the purpose of the study, their role as participants, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Informed consent was taken among all participants in a written form before the interviews commenced.

The research process was conducted with a high level of confidentiality and anonymity. The data was anonymized, and all written outputs identify them by coded identifiers. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. The data were used exclusively for the purposes of this academic study.

The interviews were carried out in a non-judgmental and supportive environment that did not interfere with the cultural backgrounds and personal experiences of the participants. This was essential, especially since some interview questions allowed the participants to contemplate some potentially sensitive experiences, such as feelings of exclusion, identity change, or workplace challenges.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on semi-structured interviews with ten international employees working in Finnish organizations. The results were analyzed based on the six-phase thematic analysis model by Braun and Clarke (2006), which produced six themes corresponding to the interview guide themes of Chapter 3: (1) cultural adaptation processes, (2) communication styles and challenges, (3) teamwork and collaboration, (4) inclusion and belonging, (5) coping strategies and identity development, and (6) organizational support. The themes are provided with verbatim quotes of interviews with the participants to base the findings on the data. To maintain anonymity, the participants are identified as Participant 1 to Participant 10.

### 4.1 Overview of Participants

The ten participants were from diverse national and cultural backgrounds, occupations, and periods of residence in Finland. Table 4 provides an overview of the sample.

**Table 4.** Overview of Participants

Participant	Country of Origin	Role	Industry	Time in Finland
P1	Nepal	Machine Operator Assistant	Printing	10+ years
P2	Nepal	Forklift Driver/Warehouse Operator	Logistics	10 months
P3	Vietnam	Team Leader	Recycling	14 years
P4	Bangladesh	Recycling Worker	Recycling	7-8 months
P5	Bosnia	Process Operator	Manufacturing	9 years
P6	Bangladesh	Bartender/Manager	Hospitality	2 years
P7	Nepal	Recycling Worker	Recycling	1 year

P8	Rwanda	Material Handler	Recycling	7 years
P9	Nepal	Part-time Cleaner	Retail	6 months
P10	India	Regular Employee	Manufacturing/ Logistics	12 months

The participants had lived or worked in Finland for a minimum of six months up to fourteen years. They came from Nepal (four participants), Bangladesh (two participants), Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda, and India. They worked at entry-level, manual jobs to team leadership, and the industries were recycling, logistics, printing, hospitality, and retail. The English language was the main language of work in most workplaces although some level of Finnish was also heard in informal setting and management encounters.

## 4.2 Theme 1: Cultural Adaptation Process

The first theme encompasses the general experiences of the participants with the adjustment to the Finnish workplace culture. The similar pattern that was evident in all the interviews was the initial surprise or challenge, then gradual adaptation, and in the majority of cases a positive attitude towards the Finnish work culture, which changed with time.

Some participants reported a positive experience of overall adaptation after the first adjustment period was over. Participant 10 summarized this path:

*“Overall, my experience adapting to Finnish work culture has been positive. Finnish workplaces are generally organized, respectful, and supportive of work-life balance. However, communication style and independence expected from employees required some adjustment initially.” (Participant 10)*

Participant 6 who had a similar experience said that in Finland the working environment fostered punctuality, independence and respect and Participant 9 had the same

experience when she said she became more relaxed with overtime because the colleagues and managers were supportive. One similarity in these stories was the value of Finnish workplaces, mostly specifically in terms of punctuality, flat hierarchies, and the articulation of work expectations. As Participant 4 put it: "All you have to do is do your job correctly. So, if you do your job in your place, you're good to go" (Participant 4).

Simultaneously, a number of participants referred to the first stage of the adaptation process as quite disorienting. Participant 5, who had been in Finland for nine years, recalled his early shock at the rule-bound nature of Finnish work culture:

*"For the moment you have feeling like that people don't think, they just blindly follow the rules. But also in another way, when I adapt to that, I see that that's also the good thing."* (Participant 5)

Participant 3, who had been working in Finland for fourteen years, described a similar initial experience of the independence-focused nature of Finnish workplaces as surprising: "Finnish [people are] really independent. Everyone doing what they do, what does their focus" (Participant 3). For several participants from more collectivist backgrounds, the expectation of autonomous and self-directed working was one of the more significant adjustments required.

Throughout the data, the majority of the respondents stated that they retained their traditional cultural values and adapted their professional behavior progressively to align with the demands of the Finnish workplace. This tendency of adjusting to the profession without losing the cultural background was observed to different extents among the majority of participants irrespective of their periods of staying in Finland.

### **4.3 Theme 2: Communication Styles and Challenges**

The communication turned out to be one of the most prominent themes in the interviews. The participants mentioned two interlinked issues, including language

barriers due to the use of Finnish as the official language at work, as well as adapting to the peculiarities of the Finnish communication style.

#### **4.3.1 Language as a Barrier**

Eight out of ten identified language as one of the major challenges in their workplace experiences. The functional working language in most of the settings was the English language, although Finnish was still dominant in informal conversations, during meetings where the Finnish supervisors were in charge, and in some organizational contexts. Participant 2 also mentioned language as the most important barrier:

*"The main one of the challenging part was the language barrier, even though the working language is English, but there were still some workers who could not understand the English language." (Participant 2)*

Participant 3 described a common experience of attending meetings conducted in Finnish: "Most of the supervisor or the manager is Finnish. And when we have the meeting, they just speak in Finnish. It's a bit difficult and a bit awkward at the beginning" (Participant 3).

In certain participants, language barriers went well beyond the day-to-day workplace communications and into employment access. Participant 5 described his experience of entering the Finnish job market:

*"I sent 1,300 applications for the job. I get answer on three of them." (Participant 5)*

Participant 2 has also made a similar observation, stating that Finnish language requirements seemed to be grounds of rejection even in positions where Finnish was not a strict requirement: "I feel sad regarding that things like they take Finnish language as an excuse if they wanna reject you" (Participant 2). These testimonies indicate

language to be a hindrance that not only influences workplace communication but also the circumstances in which international employees can access and develop the Finnish labor market.

#### **4.3.2 Finnish Communication Style: Directness, Silence and Brevity**

Some of the participants with more expressive cultural backgrounds explained the adaptation necessary to Finnish standards of communication, especially the directness, brevity, and silence during conversations. The differences were always characterized as being initially confusing and gradually learned with time.

Participant 5 presented a detailed explanation of learning how to interpret Finnish silence differently:

*"With Finnish people, I find out that when they hear something from you, they take the moment to process what they hear and what they're going to answer so that they answer you in the most efficient way." (Participant 5)*

Participant 3 also reports a corresponding early confusion: "A little bit silence can be mean or disarray, I don't know. But at first it's really confused, but after that it's get used to it" (Participant 3). With time, the majority of the participants learned to interpret silence as a culturally relative form of mindful processing and not a sign of rejection or disinterest.

Directness of Finnish communication also needed to be adjusted. Participant 2 noted that Finnish communication was "often very direct and brief, which was different from what I used to do" (Participant 2). Participant 10 explained the communication styles of Finnish colleagues in the following way: "Finnish colleagues are very direct and concise: sometimes it may feel abrupt to other cultures where communication is more immersive" (Participant 10).

Some participants mentioned that they had changed communication styles with each other over time. Participant 5 reflected: "Before I was speaking widely... But now after all of these years that I've been in Finland, I get to the point—you just speak straight" (Participant 5). Several participants explained this change of style in communication as a gradual and mostly positive change instead of losing their natural way of communicating.

#### **4.4 Theme 3: Teamwork and Collaboration**

Teamwork and collaboration were discussed by all participants. The data showed a generally optimistic picture of everyday team operation, as well as a range of issues pertaining to trust-building, multi-cultural team dynamics, and the settings that contribute to collaborative working.

The majority of participants expressed that their immediate team settings were well-organized, respectful, and cooperative. Participant 10 described the overall experience: "Teamwork is generally collaborative and efficient. Everyone is expected to contribute equally and responsibilities are clearly defined" (Participant 10). Participant 7 observed that he was treated as an equal member of the team, which helped in creating a comfortable working environment.

Trust-building with Finnish colleagues, however, was also noted to be a more gradual process, especially by those who were already in leadership positions. Participant 5 described this challenge:

*"Finnish people doesn't trust that easy and every time when you lead something or lead some project, it's really hard. You first need to make their trust. But after that everything goes well." (Participant 5)*

Participant 4 emphasized the contribution of team leadership to the quality of collaboration: "Teamwork is mostly depend on the team leader. How good is the team

leader? How good he can give you the role that is suitable for you" (Participant 4). A number of participants supported this opinion and implied that the quality of team leadership played a significant role in determining whether multicultural collaboration was effective or not.

The other complexities in the multicultural team environments were triggered by the presence of other workers with different backgrounds. Participant 5 encountered intergroup tensions between colleagues of historically conflicted countries:

*"We have people who is from neighbour countries and that neighbour countries doesn't like each other in between. And it's a little bit challenging to organise the two people to not make problems over the working time." (Participant 5)*

In contrast, Participant 8 explained that a common experience as an international provided a feeling of unity in his team: "Most of us are from foreign background, and most of them speak English. It's really easy because most of us all share the same challenges" (Participant 8).

Participant 8 also mentioned the topic of social cohesion in teams, indicating that a lack of structured communication between team members led to individuals being left to work alongside each other without knowing each other:

*"People are like mercenaries-- there is no camaraderie; people are not like working as a unit. I would suggest that they would include much more activities." (Participant 8)*

This observation implies that the teamwork in multicultural workplaces may need organizational effort to foster relationships, and not the anticipation that individuals will work together automatically due to the assignment of jobs near each other.

#### 4.5 Theme 4: Inclusion and Belonging

Inclusion and belonging became a subtle theme that is described with a common distinction between formal and informal inclusion. The majority of participants said they felt formally included, i.e., were given equal responsibilities and treated respectfully, but also said that they got experiences of informal exclusion, especially when it came to the language use and advancement opportunities.

Many participants reported receiving identical tasks as their colleagues in Finland and feeling respected on their teams. Participant 2 mentioned: "I was also given the same responsibility as the team member" (Participant 2). Participant 6 also reported being fairly and respectfully treated by colleagues.

Nonetheless, informal exclusion was characterized by several participants, and the most frequent was occurring when a discussion changed to Finnish in informal environments. Participant 10 explained this dynamic:

*"Informal conversation may happen in Finnish, which can make international employees feel slightly excluded. However, most teams try to switch to English when international colleagues are present."* (Participant 10)

Participant 7 shared the same experience: "It is hard to follow the conversation when my Finnish colleague speak in the Finnish, but generally they translate that in the English" (Participant 7). The translation itself was perceived as a positive gesture, yet the necessity of translation meant in itself the existence of an asymmetry between Finnish- and non-Finnish-speaking colleagues in a communication environment.

A more structural level of exclusion was narrated by Participant 1, who noted that the advancement opportunities seemed to lean in favor of native Finnish employees:

*"Most of the time, in my experience, native people, they always get this opportunity first. They are always prioritised regardless of the skills and other aspects. It feels like little different and demotivating." (Participant 1)*

This sense of being sidelined on opportunities despite being qualified was not a universal experience, but it was one of the larger inclusion struggles that were reported in the data. A number of the other participants also pointed out that as much as their daily working relationship with their colleagues was mostly constructive, access to informal networks and information was much more restricted to the international employees than their Finnish colleagues.

Some of the participants also explained how they felt excluded at the beginning but became more part of the team as they learned more language and their relationships at the workplace grew stronger. This temporal aspect was clear throughout various accounts, which indicates that inclusion in the case of international employees is a process that usually progresses over time, rather than being immediate.

#### **4.6 Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Identity Development**

The participants outlined various approaches they adopted to cope with cultural differences in the workplace and recounted how their sense of identity and professional practice had evolved over the years. One tendency observed in the data was that the majority of the participants had changed their professional behavior, but they claimed that their core cultural identity had not changed significantly.

Participant 10 explained this difference in a straightforward manner:

*"My core cultural identity has not changed. But my professional behaviour has adapted. I have adapted some aspects of Finnish work culture such as valuing efficiency and punctuality and independence." (Participant 10)*

Participant 9 had a similar opinion: "My cultural identity has not changed, but I have learned to adapt to different cultural practices and working styles" (Participant 9). These descriptions indicate that a significant number of participants found the adaptation process to be additive, that is, they learned new professional competencies without throwing away their original cultural framework.

Three coping strategies came out consistently throughout the data. First, active observation and learning was reported by some of the participants as a core strategy. Participant 7 remarked, "I try to observe how my colleague communicate and I also ask them questions... being open and willing to learn, that helped me to adopt the culture of difference" (Participant 7).

Second, proactive communication has been referred to as one of the strategies that can be used to overcome misunderstandings. Participant 1 explained the ability to stay clear and communicate in a difficult situation:

*"If they don't understand, just make them understand. You keep asking, do you understand? I mean this — or give them example. Most of the time I have been doing this to deal with them."* (Participant 1)

Third, language learning was also perceived as the most significant long-term strategy. Participant 3, who has fourteen years' experience, said, : "Learning Finnish is one of the first option if we need to adapt or work in Finland" (Participant 3). Several participants referred to practicing Finnish in workplace and daily contexts as an active practice in order to enhance access to communicative opportunities gradually.

A more profound change in the communication style was observed among the participants who had spent several years in Finland. Participant 5 explained this change nine years later:

*"Before I was speaking widely... But now after all of these years which I'm in Finland, I get it to the point — you just speak straight and you don't need to have explained your opinion." (Participant 5)*

Participant 3 observed similar progress: "I think I talk less than before... I live in Finland, so I communicate with people quite less" (Participant 3). These descriptions indicate that the residence time in Finland was correlated with a more radical change in communication orientation beyond surface adaptation.

The emotional aspect of adaptation also existed, but this was not so evident in the data. Participant 1 reported feelings of being demotivated early on when opportunities were seen as unevenly distributed. Participant 2 related early shyness and self-awareness that yielded to increased confidence with the improvement in language skills and development of relationships in the workplace. Most participants seemed to become relaxed about these affective experiences.

#### **4.7 Theme 6: Organizational Support**

The final theme deals with the experience of the participants of organizational support and their recommendations for improvement. Throughout the majority of interviews, a significant disparity was observed between the extent to which the participants perceived that they would have liked to receive support, based on its formality, and the support that their organizations offered.

In response to organizational support, several of the participants indicated that they did not receive much formal assistance other than basic task instruction. Participant 1 said: "I didn't get any support like that. Well, just the question answered, that's it. Otherwise no, not any specific support" (Participant 1). Participant 8 shared a similar experience: "I do not think there is any support in it. It's like you just have to come and do the work" (Participant 8).

Participant 10 shared a common experience of onboarding that was oriented to safety and procedural issues:

*"When I started working, the company provided basic training about safety and work procedures and how to handle materials. My supervisors and colleagues also helped me understand the tasks and workplace rules." (Participant 10)*

Although such assistance helped with the needs of immediate tasks, it was not applicable to cultural orientation, language support, or overall integration into the work environment. The support offered was apparently functional instead of culturally responsive.

One of the common issues in various interviews was the lack of information regarding workplace rights and structures. Participant 1 outlined the lack of information concerning collective labor agreements:

*"Many immigrants might not know about this collective labor agreement with these unions. And the organization didn't tell you anything about that. My point is, if they start to think or behave equal to every employee, then it will be very good for all of the international employees." (Participant 1)*

Participant 10 mentioned the same matter separately, indicating that organizations must take the initiative in broadcasting news regarding the membership and advantages of the labor unions. The two participants who belong to different backgrounds and industries brought up this particular gap independently, which might indicate that it is a wider trend and not a single phenomenon.

In spite of these gaps, the participants provided a variety of practical ideas concerning organizational improvement. Participant 7 suggested the language support and cultural orientation: "The organization could provide more language support or cultural

orientation. This could help international employees understand the workplace faster" (Participant 7). Participant 8 emphasized the value of social activities for building team cohesion:

*"I would suggest that they would make so many social activities among the team so that they get to know each other and spend some time together. If there is camaraderie among the colleagues, it tends to become a bit easier."* (Participant 8)

Participant 5 called for greater openness in employment processes, suggesting organizations should give international employees more opportunity to demonstrate their abilities: "Finnish companies give more opportunity to the people who came here and who don't speak the Finnish language" (Participant 5). Participant 4 suggested that Finnish team leaders should become more active in mentoring international colleagues and clarify their expectations at work.

The recommendations also suggest an active style of inclusion-an inclusion where the organization takes active measures to ensure that the international employees are accommodated rather than hoping that within the course of time adaptation will take place automatically..

#### **4.8 Summary of Findings**

The findings in this chapter provide a comprehensive picture of how international employees at Finnish workplaces undergo their cultural adaptation, communication, teamwork, inclusion, identity development, and organizational support. A number of cross-cutting patterns came up within the six themes.

The majority of participants defined adaptation as a process of slow adjustment that is marked by a start of difficulty and gradual adaptation. The Finnish work culture, especially punctuality, flat hierarchies, and organizational clarity, was mostly welcomed,

whereas the high level of autonomy and the directness of the Finnish communication necessitated the most crucial adaptation. Language—the Finnish language and the adaptation to the Finnish communication standards proved to be the most frequently reported barrier throughout the data.

The participants mostly felt to be formally accepted in their teams with the same responsibilities in the tasks, and they were treated with respect. But informal exclusion had been a common experience, especially where there was discussion in Finnish in informal settings, and in other instances, the felt preference given to native Finnish colleagues in terms of career progression. The majority of the participants explained that they retained their core cultural identity and modified their professional behavior, which implied an additive and not a subtractive trend of identity development over time.

Organizational support was reported as minimal by most participants and was mostly linked to safety, and training of tasks. The major gaps that were identified were lack of cultural orientation, language support, and information regarding workplace rights. Suggestions made by the participants were based on language programs, social team-building activities, and better communication of workplace structures.

Regarding the primary research question, the evidence indicates that cultural adaptation issues determine the effect of teamwork and collaboration in three main ways: language barrier, which restricts participation in informal team communication; adaptation problems with Finnish communication norms, which can result in the first friction in collaborative communication; and the difference between formal inclusion and informal belonging, which can decrease the building of trust and engagement. To address sub-question a, the key barriers were determined as the language requirements, indirectness and the norm of silence-based communication, exclusion of informal language, and the perceived disparity in the promotion prospects. In terms of sub-question b, the participants proposed language support, cultural orientation program, structured social activities and more aggressive communication of rights and

structures in the workplace. These results are presented in comparison to the theoretical framework and literature in Chapter 5.

It is notable that three participants, namely, Participants 1, 5, and 8, deviated significantly from the predominant trend of progressive positive adaptation. Even after over ten years of living in Finland, participant 1 still felt that he was unfairly treated in terms of advancement opportunities, indicating that the long-term residence is not a guarantee of eliminating structural barriers to inclusion. Participant 5 provided the most structurally critical view in the data; after applying to job opportunities 1,300 times and receiving hardly any feedback, he shared his experiences of perceived salary inequality and disparities with Finnish colleagues, demonstrating that the issue of cultural adaptation extends beyond the workplace and into the labor market itself. The fact that participant 8 described teams as mercenaries and there was no camaraderie showed that the structure lacked social cohesion which could not be overcome through personal coping mechanisms. Analytically, these cases of outliers are valuable since they demonstrate the boundaries of personal adaptation mechanisms in cases where structural and relational circumstances are inadequate in organizations. Their experiences indicate that the largely positive adaptation process outlined by most of the respondents might be highly reliant on contextual variables - sector, organizational culture, and length of residence - and not a universal trend to be applied to all international workers working in Finnish workplaces.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusions**

This chapter discusses the findings of Chapter 4 in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature established in Chapter 2. The chapter is divided into four sections. Section 5.1 views the findings as interpretations of the four individual-level theories—Berry, Kim, Ward, and Sussman—with a critical-mindedness to where the theories are upheld and where they are partial-only and where the Finnish context shows some dimensions that are not well represented by the theories. The organizational-level moderators (cross-cultural communication competence and inclusive leadership) are analyzed in Section 5.2. Section 5.3 is concerned with academic contributions, practical implications, and limitations. Section 5.4 presents conclusions that directly respond to all three research questions.

Although the results largely confirm all four theoretical models, a critical interpretation of the evidence also shows shortcomings in their explanatory scope when used in the Finnish labor market setting. Specifically, the structural barriers mentioned by Participants 1, 5 and 8, such as employment gatekeeping via language requirements, perceived salary disparity and the long-term nature of informal exclusion despite years of residence, suggest aspects of the adaptation experience that the individual-level theories of adaptation by Berry's and Sussman's model do not address comprehensively. These results imply that even though the frameworks are analytically useful, they need to be complemented with structural and labor market perspectives to comprehensively explain the adaptation outcomes in the Finnish context.

### **5.1 Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

#### **5.1.1 Adaptation Strategies and Berry's Acculturation Model**

Berry's acculturation model (Berry, 1992, 1997, 2005) suggests four orientations to adaptation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. The data show that the majority of the participants followed the integration strategy—acceptance of

Finnish professional norms without losing their original cultural identity. The statement of Participant 10 that 'my core cultural identity remains the same, but my professional behavior has changed' reflects this orientation accurately, and this was repeated by many other participants.

This trend generally adheres to the argument by Berry's (1997) that integration yields the most desirable adaptation results. In a meta-analysis of 83 studies, Nguyen and Benet-Martinez (2013) discovered that biculturalism (which is the integration strategy adopted by Berry) has a positive relationship with psychological and sociocultural adaptation, which further allows supporting this tendency in the data.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate the weakness in Berry's framework when trying to apply it to the Finnish setting. Berry's model views integration mainly as an issue of individual strategy where individuals have the option of adopting the host culture. The information challenges this supposition. The experience of Participant 1 being sidelined in terms of promotion and the 1,300 job applications of Participant 5 demonstrate that the outcomes of integration are not randomly determined—they are facilitated or impeded by the structural features such as labor market gatekeeping, language, and access to informal networks. These structural dimensions demand that there should be organizational analysis that supports the framework.

### **5.1.2 The Adaptation Process Over Time: Kim's Stress–Adaptation–Growth Model**

The stress-adaptation-growth model of Kim (Kim, 2001, 2017) defines the adaptation process as a cycle in which individuals go through repeated stress, adaptation, and growth phases, which progressively build up intercultural competence. This model is briefly evidenced by the information. Stress, i.e., language barriers, foreign communication norms, and high autonomy expectations characterized early adaptation, which resulted in disorientation. Over time, the majority of respondents acknowledged gradual learning, growing confidence, and finally becoming comfortable with Finnish workplace practices.

The most noticeable participants in the growth stage were longer-term ones. After nine years, participant 5 recounted a fundamental change of concise and direct communication. After fourteen years, participant 3 noted that he had become significantly less communicative than he used to be—this was an internalization of the Finnish norms of independent and focused work. Such testimonies indicate the real intercultural evolution instead of a mere superficial compliance, which is aligned with the idea of Kim's (2017) progressive reorganization of the internal meaning system.

However, there is a SAG limitation in this regard. The model suggests an overall upward trend within which the stress gradually decreases. To a certain degree this optimism is justified by the data. Even after over a decade of residence in Finland, participant 1 reported experiencing inequity in career opportunities. This demonstrates that the growth stage is not automatic, but rather depends on whether the organizational climate provides the trust, inclusion and equal access that are implicitly assumed in the Kim's model. Such circumstances are sometimes inapplicable in the Finnish context; the SAG model's trajectory should be conditional, not universal.

### **5.1.3 The Affective, Behavioural, and Cognitive Dimensions of Adaptation**

According to the ABC model by Ward (Ward et al., 2001), affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of adaptation are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Each dimension was observable in the accounts of participants, and collectively they describe how adaptation challenges influenced participation in Finnish teams.

The affective dimension, psychological well-being, and emotional comfort were most prominent in the early adaptation narratives. Participant 2 reported initial shyness and a feeling of insecurity; Participant 1 reported feeling demotivated after perceived unfairness in the distribution of opportunities. Such affective issues are consistent with the results of Ward et al. (2001), who report that the poor psychological well-being of early adaptation inhibits communicative interaction and slows integration. Behaviorally, the participants trained to be more autonomous, to be more direct in their

communication, and to view Finnish silence as an asset and directly contributed to reduce communicative tension in the teamwork.

The most significant long-term outcome was the cognitive dimension, i.e., reinterpreting cultural norms and creating new frameworks. The best illustration was the redefinition of Finnish silence: the participants that at first viewed it as a lack of interest eventually realized that it was considered thoughtful processing. This cognitive transformation helped a great deal to reduce misunderstanding and enable effective collaboration following the change. Ward et al. (2001) observe that cognitive reframing and affective well-being are reinforcing variables, where the more one learned about Finnish norms, the more they felt emotionally comfortable, which helped to continue with behavioral involvement.

The ABC model works well in terms of the layered nature of adaptation but pays less consideration to the roles of organizational structures that facilitate or hinder each dimension. These findings indicate that the affective adaptation was highly conditioned by the active welcoming of colleagues and supervisors who were significant relational and organizational variables beyond the individual level of the model. This makes the need to combine individual-level frameworks with organizational-level analysis, which is what the theoretical framework in this study achieves.

#### **5.1.4 Cultural Identity Development: Sussman's Cultural Identity Model**

According to the cultural identity model by Sussman (2000, 2011), there are four patterns of identity response, such as affirmative, subtractive, additive, and intercultural. The data indicated a prevalent additive response: the majority of respondents did not abandon their cultural framework and included Finnish professional competences in it. Participant 9 noted that she had not changed her cultural identity, but she has adapted to other cultural practices; Participant 10 made a distinct difference between professional adaptation and identity preservation.

These intercultural identity movements were visible among the longer-term participants. Participants 5 and 3 defined the change in communication as more of a reorientation of their professional self-concept, not a surface adaptation but a more integrated and internalized incorporation of Finnish norms into their perceptions of effective workplace communication. This pattern is in line with the description of identity development of Sussman (2011) as a cumulative and deepening process.

Nonetheless, this model has a limitation. Sussman established her framework based mainly on the study of short-term sojourners and return migrants. The data show that identity responses are not fully instigated by the internal psychological processes but also by structural conditions, whether the workplace is proactive in delivering the message that the employee is valued or not. Participants who were more positively included in their workplace exhibited more positive patterns of identity development, and those who had been informally excluded had indications of affective strain. The framework by Sussman is analytically valuable but should be construed as contextually based as opposed to predictable.

## **5.2 Organizational Moderators: Communication Competence and Inclusive Leadership**

### **5.2.1 Cross-Cultural Communication Competence**

The communicative friction which was almost experienced by all participants is defined by the high-context and low-context communication framework developed by Hall (1976). Finland's low-context style (direct, explicit, economically worded) was entirely contrary to the expectations of South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Eastern European subjects. This is complemented by Gudykunst's (2005) theory of anxiety and uncertainty management: the lack of familiar communicative cues leads to the growth of anxiety and the reduction of effectiveness. Due to cultural knowledge and language proficiency, the level of anxiety decreased, and confidence increased as time passed by—a direction in which the AUM framework predicts and the data verify.

The data also go beyond the individual communicative competence to a structural level which is not exhaustively addressed by Hall and Gudykunst. Language proficiency did not just serve as a medium of communication within the team, but it also acted as a gatekeeping process to access employment, informal networks, and information at the workplace. The size of this obstacle is illustrated by the case of participant 5, who placed 1,300 applications. Language requirements should be addressed at the policy level in recruitment, not only by developing a communicative competence on an individual level, but it seems they are required in the Finnish context.

### **5.2.2 Inclusive Leadership and Organizational Inclusion**

The data show that inclusive leadership practices were a significant factor in the process of adaptation and collaboration among the participants. Individuals who had supportive and accessible supervisors stated that they were able to adapt more quickly and participate in the team more effectively. According to participant 4, team leadership quality was the main factor of successful multicultural collaboration. According to Carmeli et al. (2010), inclusive leadership can be defined as leadership behavior that makes employees feel respected, engaged, and empowered to contribute, and Nishii (2013) goes on to state that inclusive leadership produces the psychological safety that diverse teams need to be fully engaged.

The framework presented by Shore et al. (2018) that presupposes both structural fairness and relational belonging as the keys to true inclusion can be used to identify the main paradox in the findings: the presence of formal inclusion and informal exclusion within the same workplaces. Finnish organizations were good at structural inclusion, including equal work, equal treatment, and equal hierarchy, but lower levels of relational belonging, particularly informal. This disjuncture is no coincidence; it is a measure of the challenges of making formal equality into experienced inclusion in the absence of active interpersonal interaction.

The concept of bridging social capital as outlined by Putnam (2000) describes the reason why the relational gap exists. Bonding capital between Finnish colleagues in most workplaces described was strong, but bridging capital between Finnish and international employees in informal workplaces was weak. The most reliable recommendation made by participants (organized social activities to establish team cohesion) can be seen as an urge to make sure the organization takes an active part in bridging capital instead of expecting it to form through proximity.

### **5.3 Contributions, Implications, and Limitations**

#### **5.3.1 Academic Contributions**

This research has three contributions. The empirical contribution is the qualitative evidence of ten international employees working in Finnish workplaces on how the issues of cultural adaptation influence the day-to-day collaboration. The existing literature has focused on policy-level integration and labor market entry (Stahl et al., 2021; Shumilova et al., 2012). This paper changes to organizational and team-level processes, filling a recognized gap in the Finnish workplace literature.

The theoretical contribution lies in the fact that Berry, Kim, Ward, and Sussman are analytically complementary and not competing frameworks. Collectively taken, they characterize different levels of the same adaptation process. A critical dimension is also present in the study, where each of the frameworks is found to be limiting in the Finnish labor market setting, especially concerning the structural role of language policy and the conditions that need to be in place in order to have integration that individual-level theories often under-specify.

The contextual contribution is the empirical evidence of a particular paradox within the Finnish workplaces: formal structural equality exists and is combined with informal exclusion. It has direct practical implications on Finnish organizations due to the current dependency on international labor in Finland and is also included in the broader

inclusion literature in demonstrating that equality as a cultural value does not always lead to belonging as a lived experience.

### **5.3.2 Practical Implications for Organizations**

The findings have four practical implications to Finnish organizations. First, a cultural orientation program should be a regular part of international employee onboarding, not just safety and procedural but also the cultural aspects of Finnish communication, expectations of autonomy and initiative, and working in flat hierarchies. Most of the participants learnt these norms themselves through trial and error; formal orientation would reduce the affective cost of early adaptation and accelerate the acquisition of effective team participation.

Second, language support needs to be re-outlined as the organizational task. Some participants indicated that Finnish language requirements were a barrier that was disproportionate to the real communicative requirements of their job. The access to learning Finnish language at work would mitigate both the structural barriers to access and the relational barriers to informal inclusion.

Third, there should be clear and active information access to the employees, both local and international, about workplace rights, such as collective labor agreements and trade union membership. The same gap was also detected by two participants who work in two completely different sectors on their own, meaning that there is a systemic fault that has some material consequences about the equal treatment and retention of international employees.

Fourth, the team leaders and managers ought to be offered practical advice on inclusive leadership in multicultural environments: the expression of implicit Finnish norms into explicit ones, the establishment of communication within a language barrier, the active establishment of trust with foreign employees, and the promotion of relationship formation across the cultural boundaries with a structured approach. The direct

leadership quality was the strongest organizational variable that defines the outcome of adaptation and collaboration.

### **5.3.3 Limitations of the Study**

There are four limitations on the interpretation of the findings. First, the study sample is small and geographically and culturally focused, as four out of ten participants are Nepalese citizens, and most of the participants are South and Southeast Asian. This focus could imply that the results are more indicative of adaptation challenges unique to these cultural contexts than others. The sample of future studies would also consider a broader demographic of representatives of European, African, and East Asian origins, along with knowledge workers in other fields like technology, healthcare, and education, to determine whether the trends found here can be extended to more distinct cultural distances in relation to Finnish workplace norms.

Second, the entire interview was done in English, which was not the native language of any of the participants. Although the participants were able to communicate successfully, certain emotional and identity-related overtones might have been less expressive in a second language, which might have diminished the richness of affective information. Future research would involve the hiring of interpreters or permitting the participants to answer in their most effective language. Moreover, the interviews were about 25-30 minutes in duration, which is less than the 45-60 minutes that are normally advised when conducting a semi-structured qualitative interview to explore an intricate lived experience. Such brevity might have constrained the richness of some answers, particularly in the areas of affective and identity aspects of adaptation. Possible future research includes longer interviews that would enable greater investigation of the emotional course of the cultural adaptation process with time.

Third, the research only records the opinions of international employees. There are no Finnish colleagues, supervisors, or human resource managers. The absence of their accounts does not allow evaluating whether the structural and relational gaps identified

are intentional practices or unquestioned assumptions or resource constraints. A multi-perspective design would give a more comprehensive view of multicultural team dynamics at Finnish workplaces.

Fourth, as acknowledged in Chapter 3, the interview guide failed to explicitly discuss the affective component of early adaptation, preference of acculturation strategy, or informal relationship-building with Finnish colleagues. These dimensions were found in the data, although they were not pursued in a systematic way. Future studies using a revised interview guide that focuses on these aspects would yield more data on the psychological and interpersonal aspects of adaptation.

## **5.4 Conclusions**

This chapter has presented the findings concerning all four theoretical frameworks and organizational-level moderators. This section directly addresses the three research questions.

To answer the primary research question, how cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration, the results indicate three major mechanisms. The language barriers limit the involvement in informal team communication and, in particular, limit the employment and promotion opportunities. The peculiarities of Finnish communication, such as directness, brevity, and the cultural peculiarity of silence, introduce preliminary tension during the collaboration with the employees who belong to expressive cultures, but usually this calm is eliminated with the process of cognitive reframing. The inability to bridge the differences between formal and informal belonging makes the quality of trust-building less effective and reduces the connection to the social networks and creates the feeling of demotivation that obstructs the cooperative participation.

The study (answer to sub-question a) in answering what the main cultural and organizational barriers are identifies four barriers, namely the Finnish language

requirement that serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, rather than a genuine necessity; norms of indirect and silence-based communications that encompass a lot of cognitive restructuring; informal exclusion by having Finnish language conversations in social contexts; and the perceived priority of native Finnish colleagues to get a promotion. More to the point, most of these obstacles are structural conditions which are within the capacity and responsibility of organizations to address, not a matter of individual-level adaptation challenges.

To answer sub-question b—what practices and strategies can organizations implement?—the data suggests four evidence-based recommendations to answer the sub-question: a structured cultural orientation program of all the norms of Finnish communication, its autonomy requirements, and definition of silence; organizational responsibility to provide language support in the workplace as an individual burden, not as a collective responsibility; and clarification of workplace rights such as collective labor agreements, trade union membership, and inclusive leadership practices bridging differences between cultures and their communication.

The current demographic and economic situation in Finland, which is marked by the aging population, the rising labor shortages, and the rising reliance on the international labor force, makes the results of this study of practical importance. The ability to establish truly inclusive multicultural workplaces will be a more important organizational competence as Finnish organizations rely more and more on international employees to keep their operations afloat. This paper presents empirical findings and theoretically based recommendations, but it acknowledges the fact that the processes through which international employees gain a sense of belonging, competence, and contribution in the Finnish work life are a promising area of future research.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Study Title (Thesis): Cultural Adaptation Challenges in Team Collaboration: A Study of International Employees in Finnish Workplaces

Researcher: Parbati Tamang, Master's Student (Strategic Business Development)

Institution: University of Vaasa

Contact Email: [x9369754@student.uvasa.fi](mailto:x9369754@student.uvasa.fi)

Supervisor: Sniazhana Diduc

#### Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted as part of a master's thesis at the University of Vaasa. Before you decide whether to participate, please read the following information carefully. The purpose of this document is to help you understand the nature of the study and what your participation would involve.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how international employees experience cultural adaptation in Finnish workplaces and how these experiences influence teamwork and collaboration. The research focuses on communication practices, inclusion, coping strategies, and organizational support within multicultural work environments.

#### Why You Have Been Invited

You have been invited to participate because you are an international employee currently working in a Finnish organization. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable for understanding how cultural adaptation challenges are perceived and managed in Finnish workplaces.

#### What Participation Involves

If you agree to participate:

- You will take part in a one-time semi-structured interview.
- The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.
- The interview may be conducted online or face-to-face, depending on your preference and availability.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to:

- Decline to answer any question during the interview.
- Stop the interview at any time.
- Withdraw from the study without giving any reason and without any negative consequences.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

All information collected during the study will be treated with strict confidentiality:

- Your name and any identifying details will not appear in the thesis or any related publications.
- Pseudonyms will be used in interview transcripts and reporting.
- Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.
- All recordings will be deleted after the completion of the thesis.

### **Possible Risks and Benefits**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Some questions may encourage reflection on personal experiences, but you may skip any questions that make you uncomfortable.

There are no direct personal benefits from participating. However, your contribution will help improve understanding of cultural adaptation in Finnish workplaces and may inform more inclusive organizational practices in the future.

**Use of the Results**

The findings of this study will be used solely for academic purposes as part of a master's thesis. The results may be presented in academic contexts such as seminars or publications, but no information that could identify you will ever be disclosed.

**Consent Form**

By signing below, you confirm that:

- You have read and understood the information provided above.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- You understand that you may withdraw from study at any time without consequences.
- You give permission for the interview to be audio-recorded.
- You understand that your data will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2. Interview Questions**

### **Section 1: Background**

1. What is your current job role and the type of organization you work for?
2. How long have you been working in Finland?
3. What is your cultural or national background?
4. What language(s) do you mainly use at work?

### **Section 2: Cultural Adaptation**

5. How would you describe your overall experience of adapting to Finnish work culture?
6. What aspects of Finnish work culture did you find easiest to adapt to?
7. What aspects did you find most challenging when you started working in Finland?

*(You may think about communication style, autonomy, hierarchy, work–life balance, or decision-making.)*

### **Section 3: Communication in Teams**

8. How would you describe communication within your team?
9. Have you experienced misunderstandings or challenges in communication with colleagues?  
If yes, what caused them?
10. How comfortable do you feel expressing your ideas or opinions during meetings?

### **Section 4: Teamwork and Inclusion**

11. How would you describe teamwork and collaboration in your team?
12. Do you feel included as an equal member of your team? Why or why not?
13. Have you ever felt excluded from informal discussions, social activities, or decision-making at work?

**Section 5: Coping and Identity**

14. What strategies have you used to cope with cultural differences at work?
15. Has your way of working or communicating changed over time? If yes, how?
16. Do you feel your cultural identity has changed since working in Finland?

**Section 6: Organizational Support**

17. What kind of support, if any, has your organization provided to help you adapt?
18. How do managers or team leaders support multicultural teamwork?
19. What could organizations do better to support international employees?

**Section 7: Reflection**

20. Based on your experience, how do cultural adaptation challenges influence teamwork and collaboration in Finnish workplaces?
21. Is there anything else you would like to reflect on or share during the interview?