

“The cultural stuff around how to talk to people”: Immigrants’ intercultural communication during a pre-employment work-placement

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Abstract

This paper reports on a small in-depth study of sixteen immigrants’ intercultural communication experiences as they enter the workforce in New Zealand through a volunteer work-placement scheme. The key research questions are: What intercultural communication challenges do immigrants face during work-placement with i) co-workers, and ii) employer(s)? How is intercultural communication facilitated/constrained in intercultural encounters in the workplace? The findings highlight how cultural, social, economic, political, and contextual factors support immigrants’ intercultural communication and work experience in their respective organisation. The outcomes provide important feedback to employers, immigrant communities, funders and other voluntary organisations, community workers, and politicians on the value of work-placement programmes and the intercultural communication challenges immigrants face when entering the workplace.

本研究以跨国移民为调研对象，选取了十六位由某志愿服务组织引荐到新西兰工作的移民，对他们的跨文化交流经历进行了深入的调研。本文主要探索了他们在工作期间与同事、老板进行跨文化交流时遇到的挑战，以及在跨文化的工作环境下如何促进或阻碍跨文化交流。根据研究结果，本文概述了文化、社会、经济、政治及环境等因素如何助力移民的跨文化交流和工作。这为雇主、移民团体、相关的慈善基金会和志愿服务组织、社区工作者、以及执政者提供了重要的反馈信息，从而为更好地发挥这些移民工作实习项目的价值，并为移民减少跨文化交流带来的挑战提供借鉴。

Keywords: Social constructionism, immigrant employment, intercultural communication, workplace communication, intercultural encounters, capabilities

Introduction

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Migration for purposes of work or another way of living (for better or worse) usually requires that those immigrants find employment to facilitate, at a basic level, survival, but more positively, settlement into the community and broader society. Working within what is often a different linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, geographical, historical, national, and local context often requires new forms of interaction, both for the incomer and those already established at the site of the encounter. This situation requires that interlocutors must (re)negotiate and (re)evaluate their ways of communicating, identifications, and positions of power to accommodate new and sometimes different communication practices within the workplace. Yet, the nature of these workplace intercultural communication experiences, especially from the perspectives of immigrants themselves as they have been supported through a work-placement programme, has been little investigated or reported in the literature.

This study aims to address that gap by investigating the intercultural challenges immigrants face in the workplace (via a work-placement programme), and the communication practices that facilitate and/or constrain intercultural communication in this context from a social constructionist perspective. I begin by reviewing the literature on immigrant employment and workplace intercultural communication, focusing on the New Zealand context where the study is situated. The research questions shape the empirical data collection and methodology. The findings from the study, and their conclusions and implications are then presented.

Many cross-cultural research approaches in business and organisational research have typically drawn on essentialist theories and approaches that seek to generalise understanding to specific cultures or nation states (e.g., Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995) (See Holmes, 2012, for a critical discussion of these models in business communication education). By contrast, I draw on social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and concepts linked to intercultural communication to interpret the individual lived experiences of migrants as they interpret their communication and interactions with workplace colleagues. In addition, I favour a critical-interpretive approach that foregrounds immigrants' voices from a position of powerlessness, especially as they search to establish themselves through employment in a new country. This approach resonates with Holliday's (2012) notion of critical cosmopolitanism that asserts "the potential independence of social action" where culture is described as a "negotiated process", expressed in dialogue among individuals and where these individuals have the possibility of "being able to change existing orders" (p. 38). In this sense culture is a set of meaningful practices influenced by language, religion, history, geography, political and national ideologies (Shi, 2001; Hall, 1996) that the immigrants bring with them, and which are negotiated in intercultural communication in the workplace. Culture is also messy, shifting and uncertain, constructed and reconstructed by different people with new and different ideas moving within and across communities and groups (Holliday, 2012). Therefore, to understand immigrants' workplace intercultural communication experiences, approaches that offer context-specific analyses rather than differences between national cultures or universalised competences within (inter)national groups, and that acknowledge multiple identities and particular competences among individuals and local groups are important (Lund & O'Regan, 2010). Thus, I present an insider perspective, through the voices of immigrants, of their intercultural encounters in the workplace with their colleagues.

An intercultural encounter is defined as “an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself. . . . [Intercultural encounters] may involve people from different countries, people from different regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or people who differ from each other because of their lifestyle, gender, social class, sexual orientation, age or generation, level of religious observance, etc.” (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoin-Gaillard, Philippou, 2013, p. 7). However, this definition denies the similarities and shared realities that interlocutors from different backgrounds may experience, whether regional, religious, ethnic, social class, gender, linguistic, historical, migratory or relating to memories (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012). Parts of the definition also resonate with a structuralist approach in identifying individuals with particular countries, a problematic attribution, especially in the context of migration for employment as it risks that others may essentialise an individual based on what they know about people from that country. In the workplace context, it is also important to acknowledge that intercultural communication occurs among individuals who may have “starkly different material, economic, social and cultural resources at their disposal” (Piller, 2011, p. 173). Where immigrants are concerned, they are likely to have unequal access to discourses of interpersonal communication and associated small talk, and to discourses of power and positioning within organisations. Intercultural encounters in the workplace are therefore useful sights to understand intercultural communication and how individuals might (re)negotiate and (re)construct their communication styles and identity.

Immigrants and the New Zealand workplace

The literature on labour market marginalisation of ethnic minority people is well documented in Europe (Zegers de Beijl, 2000), and internationally (Fugazza, 2003). Research in the New Zealand context reveals the nature of intercultural communication in the workplace. For example, research undertaken by the Department of Labour (DOL) (2004) reports that immigrants enjoy positive experiences in the workplace, and concomitantly, more positive settlement when their language, skills and qualifications complement those of other people in the New Zealand labour force. Yet 30 percent of the 7,137 immigrants (excluding refugees) who responded to the DOL (2004) survey, having resided in New Zealand for approximately six months, were unemployed; 25 percent, particularly those from North and South-east Asia, reported incidents and feelings of discrimination in the workplace. Other research conducted by the Electricity Supply Industry Training Organisation (ESITO, 2008) suggests that immigrants leave their employment for reasons of discrimination; lack of respect, recognition, and professional growth; and job satisfaction expectations not being met. Where language is concerned native-speaker fluency was often expected; and New Zealand English was often prioritised by both employers and employees in terms of accent, a preference for a local/New Zealand variety of English, and colloquialisms (Henderson, Trlin & Watts, 2006; North, 2007). These factors affect migrants’ employment prospects and also create potential intercultural communication difficulties in the workplace.

English language issues are also linked to immigrants’ ability to connect with non-immigrants in their communities, to fit in, and mix. Extensive research by the Language in the Workplace team at Victoria University of Wellington has identified that migrants may be rejected from employment for their perceived inadequate language skills instead of

attributing such communicative styles to sociolinguist nuances. For example, Holmes and Riddiford (2010) in their qualitative study of immigrants' communication practices in the workplace observed that migrants are competent in managing technical, task-oriented interactions, but some problems arose in small-talk.

Butcher, Spoonley and Trlin (2006) found that migrants did not regularly experience specific acts of discrimination from their New Zealand neighbours who, while civil to immigrants, appeared to make little effort to communicate with or learn about them, their background, culture, or language. Findings from the Connecting Diverse Communities Project (2006), a New Zealand government initiative directed at building (immigrant) capacity and developing connections in communities, however, noted that some immigrants felt the need to continue to identify strongly with their country of origin as part of the process of integrating into the new culture, while simultaneously wanting to establish meaningful contact with people in the host community. Further, the report found that New Zealand citizens expected that people from other cultures should be the same as everyone else, or at least, not be too different. And Johnston, Gendall, Trlin and Spoonley's (2010) research noted that despite policy shifts towards a multicultural society, New Zealanders still demonstrated a resistance towards immigrant arrivals, especially from Asia and the Pacific Islands. In fact, in terms of barriers to workplace employment, cultural fit versus cultural differences, English language skills, communication, and interpersonal skills, and accent were rated as the leading barriers to workplace employment (Podsiadlowski, 2007).

In conclusion, research on immigrant employment suggests that immigrants' workplace experiences may not always be positive; at worst, immigrants face unemployment and continual rejection in job applications. The outcome may be a downward spiral of isolation and disadvantage for immigrants, and a society of diverse communities living alongside one another, but isolated in their own groups and failing to connect—a failed multiculturalism (Cantle, 2012).

This study reflects on the potential for immigrant workplace inclusion and exclusion by investigating the intercultural communication among immigrant employees, their employers, and local staff as facilitated through an immigrant work-placement programme. As evidenced in the literature, the success of immigrant work-placement programmes has overarching implications for their longer-term engagement and settlement in the community and wider society. Given this situation, the following research questions emerged:

RQ1: What intercultural communication challenges do immigrants face during work placement with i) co-workers, and ii) employer(s)?

RQ2: How is intercultural communication facilitated/constrained in intercultural encounters in the workplace?

The research methodology

Acknowledging that many studies of immigrant employment patterns and experiences have relied on quantitative surveys (see, for example, the New Zealand literature conducted by governmental bodies cited above), my concern was to provide thick descriptions of how immigrants experienced intercultural communication in the workplace with their co-workers

and employers. Insider perceptions of immigrants' everyday social interaction may shed light on their intercultural communication experiences and how they make sense of these. The study was informed by the overarching theory of social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966) which gives primacy to everyday conversations as the process in which knowledge is "developed, transmitted and maintained" in social interaction (p. 15). Through open-ended interviews participants could "look more deeply at self-other interaction" which Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 740) argue can be "emancipatory", allowing participants to reflect on self and other through exploration, questioning, emotional involvement and self-discovery. Further, the research enabled immigrants' voices to be heard by others, thus opening up spaces for deeper understanding.

The context of the study is a volunteer 3-month work-placement programme, supported by government funding, for immigrants who had been living in New Zealand from 3 months to 6 years and who had not yet found employment. The programme included a series of preliminary workshops to introduce immigrants to New Zealand workplace culture, e.g., job searching, immigration law, curriculum vitae writing, interview techniques, and social and legal matters (including the role of the Treaty of Waitangi as a founding document for bicultural/bilingual New Zealand). The workshop sessions were administered and taught by the programme co-ordinator and included invited speakers. The immigrants on the programme then undertook paid or voluntary employment, usually in a small business.

Of the 16 participants in the study, only one had had previous work experience as a volunteer for 3 months. Twelve were females, and four males; they were aged between 26-55 years. They came from Chile, China, Columbia, Fiji, India, the Philippines, the Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom (UK). The programme co-ordinator, from the UK, had lived in New Zealand for 9 years. Five employers were also interviewed to establish their perceptions of how immigrants experienced their work placements. Three employers had experienced employing immigrants, and two had previously hired immigrants from this programme.

The interviews, transcriptions, and coding were conducted by a paid research assistant, herself an immigrant and international student from Germany. Like all the participants (except the UK participant), she was using another language, English, in the research process which helped to bridge the power distance likely to be found in native-speaker-researcher and non-native-speaker-participant interviews. To ensure that she worked in ethical and transparent ways, and in order to establish rapport, develop familiarity, and gain trust, the research assistant attended some of the workshops offered by the programme co-ordinator. The programme co-ordinator helped to establish the authenticity and importance of the research to participants as she both confirmed and endorsed the research assistant's researcher role by emphasising the study's importance in developing an insider understanding of immigrants' intercultural communication experiences in the workplace. These shared experiences with participants enabled the research assistant to develop rapport and empathy with them, and to support the less fluent and more apprehensive participants in the interview context.

The in-depth, open-ended interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes. The research assistant invited participants to choose where to be interviewed in order to enable them to feel comfortable about the interview process: four chose a secluded space in their workplace, two

were interviewed in their own homes, and the remainder were interviewed in a room on the premises of the work-placement programme. The researcher transcribed and coded the interviews thematically, drawing on the 6-step process identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data transcription, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas, and searching for themes, and then naming and defining themes. In the presentation and analysis of the data, identity markers of language or nationality have been excluded to avoid essentialist, stereotypical interpretations based on participants' nationalities. Such markers may disguise the complexity of their (cultural) identities (Holliday, 2010), the linguacultures they have come to inhabit through transcultural migration (Risager, 2012), and deny their own discursive constructions of their identity (Pillar, 2011).

Like all research involving humans, this study is subjective. As Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) note, both research subjects and researchers hold worldviews. The participants reflected on their own predispositions, socially constructed communication practices, beliefs, and attitudes which were illuminated to them as they engaged with colleagues in the workplace. These subjective experiences are their own, specific to their identity and local workplace experience, and therefore may not be transferable to all other immigrant employment contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An analysis of the interview data revealed the following two key themes: negotiating informal and non-hierarchical intercultural relationships, and constructing collegial relationships through intercultural communication.

Negotiating informal and non-hierarchical relationships

Hierarchies are present in the organisational structure of most workplaces, including the small businesses where these immigrants were placed. While employees respect and manage hierarchical relationships, the communication among and across individuals and groups tends towards informality and equality, e.g., through the use of first names, ignoring titles, and reciprocal communication (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). In the following example, the degree of informality, signalled by the “yelling” at the employee, with the expectation that the yelling would be reciprocated, created complications regarding the employer-employee hierarchy, and the expected response:

If you have such a respect or hierarchy in an organisation then they treat you in some different way as well. They will never scream at you because they know you cannot do it back. But here, your boss could yell at you, so you have to yell back. Sometimes you have to adapt.

And the consequences:

If you cannot get rid of this hierarchy in your mind, then your New Zealand supervisor would treat you as less significant because that is the way you present yourself.

One participant expressed feelings of discomfort when her boss praised her work:

I don't feel comfortable when [my supervisor] says.... I'm not used to praises because in [my country] we don't really do that. If you get something done you give it to your boss and he will say 'alright'. But [my supervisor] would say really nice things like 'perfect, very good' [also in front of others]. I don't feel comfortable because in our culture we don't do that and I just don't know how to respond.

The employer was also aware of her discomfort as he had created an open exchange with her in weekly meetings where she was able to explain her attitudes and feelings around being praised. The employer explained:

In some of those weekly meetings she said that she felt uncomfortable because I kept on saying 'good job, well done, I like this'. She was not used to that. Her boss would never ever say, 'good'. There was always something wrong. It took her maybe two or three weeks to get used to that.

The employer's attempt to make her feel valued and develop her confidence by praising her work was misunderstood by this participant, instead, resulting in feelings of awkwardness. In their home countries immigrants can gauge the social position of others through language, background, and the unspoken. But in New Zealand, they are likely to be unaware of these socio-cultural-linguistic cues, or if they are aware, how to use them to their advantage. Holmes (2006), in her research on gender in the workplace, noted that compliments are complex; when the speaker is in a higher status position, giving compliments may reinforce their position rather than lessening it, while also helping to create a sense of team among employees. As the example illustrates, this immigrant needed time to absorb and give meaning to the employer's praise.

Working autonomously, without the need for constant checking, also had to be negotiated. One participant commented on how she thought it important to check her work with her boss to avoid making a mistake:

I do it correctly because I don't want to get a bad image. I always double-check everything. It is very stressful to do that, but I do that because I don't want to make a mistake because I want to be permanent.

By contrast, her employer found this need for constant feedback unusual and slightly irritating:

She had been used to negative feedback and being told to check everything with her boss. I wonder if she slowly understands now that we prefer that she wouldn't check everything, but rather that she did it. She is extremely intelligent so she is not going to make big mistakes. From my perspective, it is slightly irritating to have someone check.

This participant's personal anxiety about her performance was linked to her desire to secure future employment, yet her need to have her work checked contradicted her employer's expectations that employees show independence, initiative, and autonomy. Her anxiety is also indicative of what is at stake in the placement—the possibility of employment, leading to greater acceptance and integration into the community (Ward & Masgoret, 2006), and well-being and security.

Constructing collegial relationships through intercultural communication

A second major theme centred on the ways in which participants sought to build relationships with colleagues during and after work: through communication in tea breaks, engaging in small talk, and a preference for face-to-face communication over email.

Tea breaks. These offer an opportunity for developing relationships, but joining the conversation required an ability to use the informal language register and familiarity with colleagues' topics of interest. Participants discussed the awkwardness and unfamiliarity of communicating in the New Zealand social idiom, and feelings of being excluded because they could not follow:

There are words they are using, bad words, swearing, but then it looks like they are happy using it. They are smiling while they are talking. So I feel that they are not talking against me. But sometimes if they are serious talking, you have this kind of feeling that they are talking about me.

And another participant:

With the group, outside the office, in the fresh air, they have this kind of group segregation, informal conversation. You find sometimes that not to listen to their swearing kind of things. I don't want to join their conversation anymore. So I better segregate, just commune with the nature. Because if you are going to join them, then you should use the words they are using, but I am not used to that.

These examples illustrate that conversational English outside of desk work proved challenging. Some participants had used English in the workplace in their own country, which they described as "formal" English. For some participants who had been used to socializing with compatriots in their immigrant communities, the workplace highlighted the differences in communication styles. However, the coordinator explained the importance of sharing organizational rituals such as tea breaks as a way of socializing and promoting acceptance among local staff:

It is actually counterproductive for you settling in the workplace if everybody else is having morning tea and you stay at the desk working. People won't think here 'Oh, they are a really hard worker'... they might start to think 'Oh, why have they not wanted to mix with me and have morning tea?' In New Zealand . . . the social

side of work and having morning teas is actually an important part of life. But migrants think ‘If I stay and work, work, work, it’s going to make me look good’, and I say, ‘Well, actually, it might not give the best impression. It might give the impression that you don’t want to mix!’

These participant experiences illustrate the tensions around language codes and practices. As Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2012) remark, language is constructed around discourse systems in organisations (and in the community). Immigrants entering a new workplace may not necessarily share the same linguistic resources and knowledge, and may need to learn this discourse system; in doing so, they must attend to the micro- and macro-contexts of the interaction. Piller (2011) argues that “language choice and understanding are a matter of what is ‘acceptable’, what our language ideologies allow us to accept, within a particular social space or institution” (p. 159). As these examples show, the responsibility to conform to the language codes and practices—which often have to be learned and negotiated “on the job”—is on the immigrants, thus placing them in an unequal power relationship with those already there.

Engaging in small talk. Tea breaks necessitated the ability to engage in small talk. Some participants noted unfamiliarity with the practice of tea breaks and the self-disclosure it sometimes involves:

[In my home country] everything is quite straight-forward. People don’t do a lot of small talk. They don’t do tea break, and most time we keep our life professional.

Another participant described the sense of time wasting it implies, preferring direct communication:

It is taking forever to find out what people are actually trying to talk about. Here it is small talk first, and then they are coming to the point later on, and when they do it is 5 minutes talk. I guess sometimes my co-workers feel that I am quite straight-forward because I just I don’t want to do the small talk first. I always say, ‘Have you done that? Do you have that? Do you have this?’

A further challenge emerges when certain knowledge is privileged, specific to the New Zealand experience and context, which resulted in feelings of exclusion from the conversation:

If you are talking about sports, we would know about cricket, about hockey, about more traditional things. We wouldn’t know about bungee jumping and jump off which cliff. We wouldn’t know the terms, we wouldn’t know how to do it. Even when they talk about horse riding I don’t know that. Many people have, but I haven’t. ... You don’t have so many things you can talk about.

These examples illustrate how small talk contexts potentially caused awkwardness and embarrassment for participants as their colleagues talked fast, used colloquial terms, and spoke in a register they described as “Kiwi English”. However, as the Co-ordinator concluded earlier, immigrants are not always aware of the importance of small talk which provide opportunities for intercultural encounters, language learning, and integration into the community and larger society (Henderson et al., 2006; Johnston et al., 2010).

“The cultural stuff around how to talk to people”. A participant used this phrase to describe the cultural complexities associated with email as opposed to face-to-face communication. While small talk and tea break communication required certain informality, participants felt that, in contrast, emails were “cold” and “serious”:

When managers write emails here it seems like it is very very cold. But when you talk they seem very nice. They will say, ‘How are you?’ And all that.

The lack of nonverbal, contextual, affective cues available in emails created challenges in gauging their tone; consequently, face-to-face conversations seemed more manageable:

I am still trying to understand when people are really serious, when they really mean it. When they are trying to be rude and I should respond on email and be colloquial or should I just talk to them. So that is something I still can’t make out. On emails you don’t know the person, don’t know his background, his culture, or what day he is having.

An employer also commented on some immigrants’ uncertainty around tone in emails:

In an email she said to somebody, cold, somebody we never had any communication with in the past. It was a bit, it was really abrupt and kind of ‘Please make an appointment!’ and I was like, ‘Oh my God, you don’t do that, you have to try and build a relationship ... not slam the door, so of course, that person never replied. [Employer]

The coordinator described situations where immigrants failed to realise that their formal email came across as “quite demanding, just because that is the background they come from” (Co-ordinator). She also described situations where interns had sent her emails asking her the meaning of the email. These examples illustrate the complex socio-cultural cues embodied in emails which, like other forms of workplace communication, need to be understood and learned.

Intercultural communication as disempowerment. The final theme concerns how participants found communication could sometimes leave them feeling disadvantaged, resulting in feelings of detachment and of being an outsider. Collier (2005) discussed the mismatch between an avowed identity, the identity an individual chooses to project, and an ascribed identity, the identity that others give to an individual. Similarly, some participants experienced this mismatch between the identity they avowed in the workplace in their own

country which was at odds with the identity they wished to project in the New Zealand workplace, as illustrated by these two participants' comments:

In my home country I am a different person. I am just talking, talking, but here I do my thing. I am a silent person. But it is a little bit hard.

I was always accustomed to talking English very fluently and pronouncing properly. I used to talk like locals and in [my country] I was the native speaker who could speak very fluently English, so when I got here and people couldn't understand. It was very frustrating.

The linguistic competence participants experienced in their own country and workplace became "incompetence" in the New Zealand workplace. They felt a lack of linguistic resources to express their thoughts and ideas in real-time communication, and an inability to grasp the illocutionary force of the message:

I really like to talk, but if they ask some questions or talk about something, I can only give some simple word and they might think, 'ah, you don't like to talk with me', but that is not true.

You feel a little bit stupid. You are used to understand everything in your first language. And then sometimes they treat you like, they look at you like 'aw, must be stupid'.

Here [in New Zealand] 'thank you' and 'how can I help you', to express yourself, what you want to say. You want to help, you have to express it. In [country] it is not like that. In [country] everyone will know from my accent. Everybody will know from what words I have chosen. But here, English is not so much rich with the words.

Another participant, affirming the above experience, noted that "English is not emotional". Even understanding the appropriate nonverbal communication required, for example, in greetings—whether to shake hands, hug, kiss, shake hands, or none of these—could create feelings of awkwardness, as one participant who had been living in New Zealand for 3 years commented:

Every time I have to say hello you have that minute where you don't know how to say hello. I think it is still every time.

In conclusion, the intercultural communication experiences and challenges reported here by all participants (immigrants, employers and coordinators) suggest that introducing immigrants to the workplace through a voluntary internship programme may not lessen or eliminate communication issues. However, through the supportive environment of the workshops, and the mediation and support offered by the coordinator, immigrants could begin to put these intercultural communication experiences into perspective, share and deconstruct them with others on the programme, and acquire important workplace

(communication) skills. Henderson, Trlin and Watts' (2006) quantitative study of migrants in the workplace reported how language proficiency was important in affecting employment prospects for professionally qualified immigrants like those in this study. And similarly, their results indicated that their immigrant respondents perceived communication with clients or customers, either face-to-face or by telephone, and with colleagues at work as problematic. However, in foregrounding a critical cosmopolitan approach (Holliday, 2012), responsibility for communication lies with both migrants, in ensuring that their voices are heard, and employers and co-workers in acknowledging the multiple discourses and communication styles in the workplace. This study has shown that the values and communication rules informing immigrants' discourse systems (showing respect and diligence, not voicing opinions too loudly) may be different from what is expected in the New Zealand workplace. Then who judges which is the correct way? The findings in this study suggest that the responsibility to learn lies with the incoming immigrants.

Further, these insider perspectives on social interactions and communication illustrate the kind of support and training that would benefit immigrants, their co-workers, and employers in reflecting on their own intercultural awareness and communication. Guilherme (2010, p. 79) argues for the need for intercultural responsibility in the workplace, that is, that "members-in-action [must] demonstrate that they are aware of the particularities of collaborating with their co-workers, either in an inter- or intra-national context, recognising that their identities have been socially and culturally constructed based on different ethnic elements and influences" Intercultural responsibility requires that all members are responsible for "developing full and reciprocally demanding professional relationships" with one another.

The work-placement programme: Preparation for intercultural communication

The work-placement programme, in helping to prepare immigrants for intercultural communication in the workplace, is a step in the direction of developing intercultural responsibility in the workplace. Participants commented that workshops "clarify[ed] and confirm[ed] certain things about the workplace", and "workshops really helped a lot...we found other people who are in the same boat, so you don't need to disappear". These shared experiences enabled immigrants to feel less isolated. One participant summed up the value of the programme in providing a point of difference, highlighting immigrants' assets and the opportunities these can create for employers:

One of the advantages that companies can take from this programme is to use that kind of local skills like my experience, my skills, my networking in my region to improve the commercial performance of companies... the opportunity to open markets, to use another skills that people from here don't have. ... They [migrants seeking employment] must think about which skills make them different than other people here. Aren't afraid to offer that.

In facilitating immigrants' access to the workplace, the programme helps to address discrimination displayed towards immigrants in the job market (Butcher et al., 2006;

Connecting Diverse Communities Project, 2006; Fugazza, 2003; Henderson et al., 2006; Johnston et al., 2010). The participants in this study were skilled, educated, and held professional qualifications from their own countries. But without “word of mouth” connections or recommendations, they were disadvantaged, usually because they did not have “New Zealand experience”. As one participant commented, “in New Zealand, it is more who is your reference, who have you gone through, which is a very important part. It is called social networking here, which places migrants at a disadvantage because we don’t know anybody here.” One of the goals of the work-placement programme is to sidestep these discriminatory practices by establishing alternative routes into employment.

The programme also showed the potential value of the multicultural workplace, e.g., facilitating employers to develop self-awareness and criticality of their own communication, which potentially impacted on other employees in the company:

It did make me stop and think about communication and reflect on [how I interact with immigrants] in a serious way. I hadn’t done that for a long time. That was really a quite strong sense of being mindful of how many ways there are to miscommunicate and how many meanings there are to things that seem quite simple. ... It challenges your own work processes and makes you reflect about those things. It is good learning for the company as well.

The programme also demonstrated the important role of the co-ordinator as coach and mentor for immigrants, and mediator between them and employers. Participants held the coordinator in high esteem: “Having someone in between is really relieving, so you feel more confidence and for the mind”, and another reported that “she sees things objectively”. Where communication is concerned the coordinator encouraged participants to “be assertive...and speak your mind out”. The coordinator was perceived to be objective, to not have any invested interests in the businesses concerned. Therefore, participants could put trust in her, as someone who would not betray them.

Conclusions

This study sought to address two questions: What intercultural communication challenges do immigrants face during work-placement with co-workers and employers (RQ1)? How is intercultural communication facilitated/constrained in intercultural encounters in the workplace (RQ2)? Concerning the first question, the findings illustrated the immigrants’ fears and concerns in managing informal communication and relationships in tea breaks, small talk situations, and in workplace practices concerning email. Notwithstanding these concerns, participants experienced largely positive interactions, perhaps attributed to the programme itself, the important work of the coordinator (as a point of contact, a trouble-shooter, a mediator), and the employers’ support. Concerning the second question, while immigrants tried to communicate sensitively, and for the most part, responsibly, in intercultural encounters, they felt a sense of vulnerability in supervisor/employee relationships, e.g., in seeking affirmation rather than working autonomously. They also indicated a need for support and affirmation from co-workers. Participants’ responses in interviews showed a

respect and gratefulness towards employers and the work-placement programme. They also felt that they offered a point of difference, a contribution confirmed by employers who sought to support their acceptance and integration. However, whether this feeling was reciprocated by co-workers is unclear.

From the immigrants' perspectives, co-workers appeared less sympathetic to the intercultural communication challenges they faced, suggesting that more needs to be done to encourage and support new (immigrant) colleagues, through tolerance, sensitivity, and respect towards language and difference and a willingness and openness to see similarities as well as differences, and to address sociocultural and sociolinguistic inequalities where English is the dominant language (Blommaert, 2005). Such intercultural encounters point to the importance of ethical communication that challenges preconceived ideas of the other, of culture: of "taking the risk of meeting the other qua other" (Ferri, 2014, p. 19). Ferri argues that ethical communication emphasises the interdependence of self and other, but simultaneously, an awareness of one's potential to silence others through positions of power.

In conclusion, the work-placement programme provided a valuable resource in initiating immigrants into the workplace, and in helping them to manage and make sense of intercultural encounters with co-workers and employers. Yet, these outcomes were not straightforward. Several studies show that immigrants enjoy positive experiences in the workplace, and concomitantly, more positive settlement when their language, skills, and qualifications complement those of other people in the New Zealand labour force (Butcher et al, 2006; DOL, 2004; ESITO, 2008; Henderson et al., 2006). However, unless immigrants have the opportunity to show these abilities in the workplace, this outcome is unlikely. The intergroup miscommunication and differing practices and values around communication in the workplace, evident in this study, indicate the need for reciprocal intercultural learning among immigrants, co-workers, and employers, a responsibility that must be shared, rather than placing the onus on incoming immigrants.

Several implications emerge in supporting immigrants into work. First, governments should focus on internal linguistic-socio-cultural issues linked to discrimination in the workplace rather than casting intercultural communication as a problem brought about by immigration or individual immigrants (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). Denial of equal opportunities in employment may result in the affected group being unable to attach themselves to mainstream society, resulting in a vicious circle of poverty and crime (Zegers de Beijl, 2000).

Second, globalisation has increased the spread of lingua-cultural flows of different groups of people establishing their language communities around the world (Risager, 2012). The result is that multilingualism in the workplace is becoming increasingly common in cities experiencing immigration, as described by Otsuji and Pennycook (2011) in their study on metrolingualism in Sydney, Australia, raising questions of social inclusion. Piller (2011) argues that language ideologies and regimes in support of English (where it is the official language, e.g., in Australia) serve to discriminate against, and thus, disempower speakers of other languages, with the result of lessening their opportunities for employment. This is especially the case in societies where English is the dominant and official language—despite the presence of other official and minority languages. New Zealand, and the city where this study was conducted, is no exception to these global flows, lingua cultures, and language

regimes. Thus, the resuscitation of languages education and a greater emphasis on intercultural education are imperative in bringing about a “linguaging subject” who is attentive towards the hybrid and shifting nature of the self and the socially-constructed nature of language (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). This move is urgent at all levels of society, e.g., in government, health, education, and business.

Third, these findings show that training models of intercultural competence that “focus on the results or ends that an individual can achieve” (Crosbie, 2014) are limited in understanding the complexity of intercultural encounters and practices in the workplace. Phipps (2014) argues that such models, including models of intercultural dialogue, have resulted in “an industry of difference-creation, difference management and difference training as ‘solutions’ to problems in intercultural dialogue” (Phipps, 2014, p. 120). Crosbie suggests that a capabilities approach (drawing on the work of Nussbaum and Sen) focuses attention on the freedom and agency that individuals have to be and act. Thus, educating individuals to engage interculturally and responsibly involves enabling them to “critique different social discourses and practices, and to envision a life of flourishing based on notions of hospitality and social translation” (Crosbie, 2014, p. 105). The findings from this study show, in varying degrees, these processes at work (e.g., in the support of the co-ordinator and employers towards the immigrants, and in the immigrants’ attempts to communicate with co-workers in work breaks). However, there is scope for further theorising of these concepts in future research in the context of work-place intercultural encounters.

Finally, governments must also show intercultural responsibility by implementing policies and practices, and including intercultural education programmes for all, that support immigrant entry into the workplace. Investment in schemes like this work-placement programme will immigrants in contributing socially and economically to society. Community centres and non-governmental/non-profit agencies have a role to play in providing employment services, as do potential employers. Immigrants, too, need to recognise the value of work-placement programmes and lobby for their presence in the community.

Although this is a small, exploratory study of intercultural encounters among immigrant-, employer- and employee-communication in the workplace, the findings may transfer to other contexts of immigrant employment. Future research involving a larger in-depth study that explores the perspectives of co-workers, employers, and work-placement programme co-ordinators would enrich understanding of immigrants’ intercultural communication issues in the workplace, and therefore, how work-placement programmes could be developed. Further studies of attitudes towards multilingualism and intercultural communication among all groups of immigrants (beyond professional groups) are required. The data for this study was generated by a non-native speaker who interviewed other non-native speakers in English; however, the role and language practices of the researcher (and the researched) in eliciting, collecting and analysing the data needs deeper investigation. Implications for settlement, identity negotiation, and workplace intercultural responsibility among all concerned warrant further investigation. Finally, intercultural encounters in the workplace offer a valuable context for further theorising of the concepts of capability, ethical communication, and intercultural responsibility.

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