

# The importance of (in)adequate employment for immigrants' well-being and adaptation in Finland: A qualitative study

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# About the research project

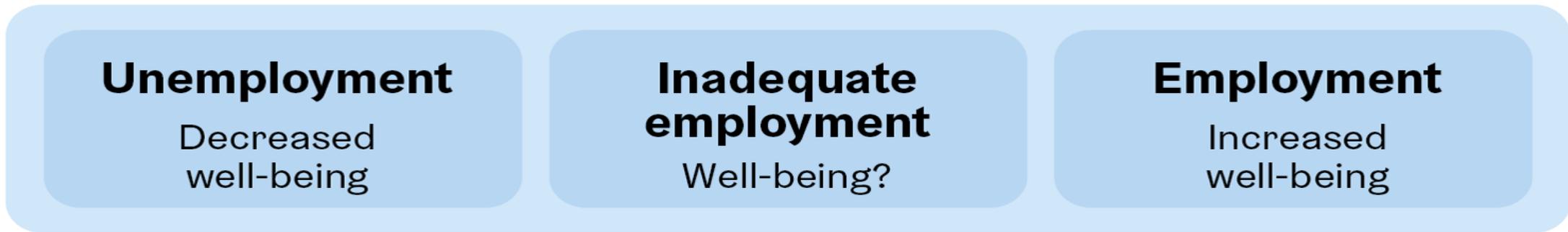
- Conducted under the *Occupational Restructuring Challenges Competencies (Polkuja työhön)* research project funded by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland.
- The loss of low- and semi-skilled jobs caused by technological progress and automation complicates the employment of persons working in these kind of jobs.
- The sub-project at the City of Helsinki explores the significance of employment to immigrant well-being and overall acculturation to the new society using both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- The qualitative study presented investigates the connection between the labor market position of immigrants and their well-being and livelihood.

# Orientating questions:

1. How long do you think your work motivation would last in case your work assignment was not at all matching your skills and it was not proceeding your career anyhow?
2. How many  $\frac{1}{2}$  year long practical work trainings would you accept in a row without receiving any salary?
3. How long would you stay at a totally wrong job, that makes you unhappy, in case your salary was good? How do you think this would affect your well-being?
4. How long would you continue in a part-time work where your salary was just the same as received as social benefits if not working at all?

# (In)adequate employment and well-being

- In this study, immigrant employment is examined as a continuum where employment that satisfies the employee in terms of the content and amount of work is at one end, and unemployment is at the other:



- Previous studies have shown unemployment to have a negative and employment a positive impact on well-being (e.g. Dooley, Fielding & Levi 1996).
- There has been much less research – particularly among immigrants – on how the various forms of inadequate employment affect people's well-being and their ability to cope financially (Dooley 2003).

# Theoretical approach 1/2

- Formed by combining immigrant acculturation and adaptation theories (Berry 1997; Ward 2001; Ward & Kennedy 1993) and Jahoda's (1981; 1982) deprivation theory of unemployment.
  - According to acculturation framework, the immigrants, after coming into a contact with the host country and its representatives, go through a psychological acculturation process that causes psychological changes in an acculturating individual, and leads to more or less desirable adaptation outcomes.
    - psychological (e.g. well-being, satisfaction with life)
    - socio-cultural (e.g. language, managing everyday life and cultural encounters)
    - socio-psychological (e.g. identity, values), and
    - economic adaptation (managing financially in the new country)
- This study focuses on the economic adaptation

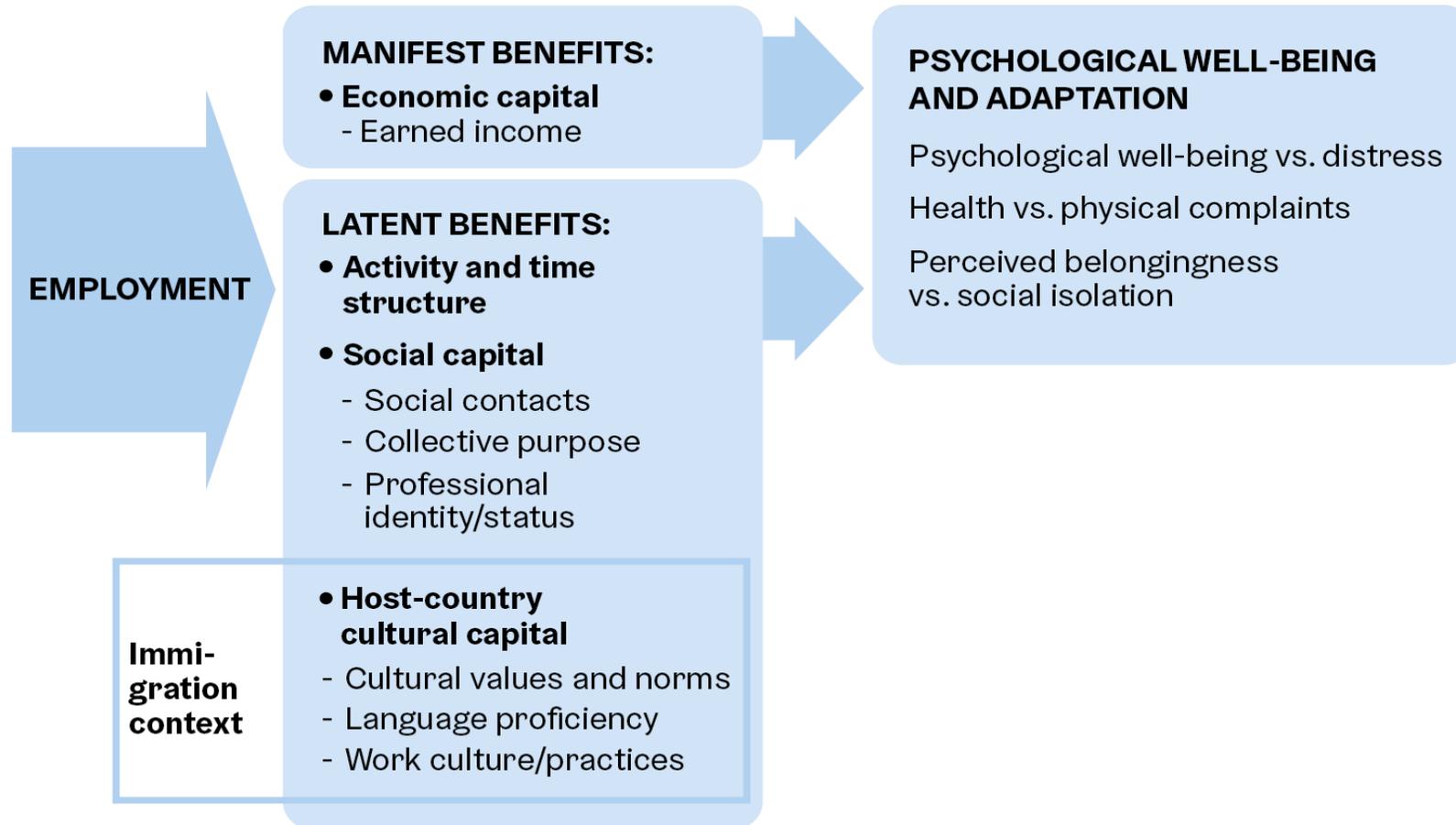
# Theoretical approach 2/2

- Jahoda distinguishes between the **manifest** (i.e. salary and other financial benefits) and **latent benefits** of employment.
- Especially the latent benefits of employment are central for well-being:
  - Employment **activates** and creates **a time structure** to a day
  - provides an opportunity to create meaningful **social networks**
  - helps to maintain **a positive identity and status** in the community
  - at work employees can sense they are working for **a shared goal**
- Unemployed people miss out on the latent benefits of work, which Jahoda sees as the major cause for impaired mental well-being.
- Surprisingly, Jahoda's theory has not been systematically applied in research concerning immigrants.



**Well-being**

# Revised model applied in this study:



# Data and methodology

- The participants ( $N = 41$ , of whom 18 women) represent different immigrant groups
  1. Western countries
  2. the area of the former Soviet Union
  3. Eastern Europe
  4. Refugees / asylum seekers who have lived in Finland for a longer period of time
  5. Educated, English speaking asylum seekers who have arrived in Finland in 2015.
- The interviewees were divided into three groups reflecting their labor market status:
  - 1. Employed** ( $n = 13$ ) were in an employment relationship that is satisfactory with respect to both the amount and the content of work.
  - 2. Unemployed** ( $n = 17$ ) were registered as unemployed jobseekers.
  - 3. Inadequately employed** ( $n = 9$ ) have not found full-time or otherwise satisfactory paid employment in Finland, but instead worked in work assignments where they were overqualified and /or did not enough work hours. E.g. those participating in different kind of active labor market policies, e.g. work trainings.
- The data was analyzed with the qualitative content analysis.

# General findings

- Each of the immigrant groups included both individuals whose employment and economic adaptation has been relatively straightforward and individuals for whom finding employment and getting by financially has been difficult. Gender was not related to successful labor market integration.
- Jahoda's theory proved to be an effective instrument in this study with respect to outlining the benefits of employment.
- Notably, in addition to the latent benefits suggested by Jahoda, this study showed that for immigrants, employment is also an important pathway to learning the host country's **language** and **(workplace) culture** – in other words, acquiring cultural capital in that country.

# Collective purpose creates meaning to life

- Having paid work and paying taxes allowed the participants to feel like they contribute to society as competent members of it.
- Especially the unemployed emphasized the need to be of use: taking money without giving anything in return and dependency on social welfare created by unemployment was perceived as a source of anxiety and distress.
- Also inadequate employment, volunteering and other leisure activities can bring a sense of meaningfulness to one's life.

# Citations: collective purpose

*“I feel more confident because I’m not this kind of person who wants to live on the government [social benefits] forever. I felt so shy when someone asked me, and I said, I study Finnish language and I do nothing. But now if anyone asks me, hey I work in this place with those amazing people and this amazing place, and I feel like, I have the rights to do anything because I’m now almost part of this society, I pay taxes, I’m part of this system, I feel like strong.”*

(a 30–40-year-old woman, asylum seeker, Bachelor’s degree)

*“I’m 39 years old. I can do a lot of things. And I do no things. And I get some social benefit and I’m not in my country. So, even I know that people don’t know exactly about it, I’m feeling guilty, when I look Finnish people because I could, say that I’m a kind of parasite of this society.”*

(a 30–40-year-old man from Western countries, Master’s degree)

*“– – sometimes when I work like volunteer, I’m really happy, because I use all my time to help people or to make anything, even without any money but I work I do something.”*

(an under 30-year-old woman, asylum seeker, Bachelor’s degree)

# Professional identity as an important part of self-image

- The inability to earn a livelihood by working was connected to the interviewees' perception of themselves and their status in the community:
  - Importantly, an unemployed immigrant may have previously held a respected job in her/his home country, along with a status perceived as highly meaningful.
  - Such a conflict between the past and the present situation can diminish one's self-esteem, make it more difficult to maintain a positive identity and also reduce well-being to a significant extent.
- As in previous studies concerning immigrants with refugee backgrounds, preserving one's professional identity proved to be particularly important among the well-educated asylum seekers (e.g. Vinokurov, Trickett & Birman 2000; Willott & Stevenson 2013).

# Citations: identity and status

*“– – people that don't know you, they don't have an idea if you are working or unemployed. It's more like how you feel, towards the others. So if you are in a strange, unknown place and you don't have a job, and you don't know the language, you are more weak also to sustain these possible attacks [difficulties] somehow. But if you have a job, then also your kind of mental health is stronger to face the possible challenges.”*

(a 30–40-year-old man from Western countries, Master's degree)

*“I lost my social status [because] I didn't have work, of course, work is really important. And I even didn't know who I am because I am much more than only wife or whatever I was. And then my anorexia just came back and it was really, really tough.”*

(a 30–40-year-old woman, from the area of the former Soviet Union, Master's degree)

# Work place provides a functional atmosphere for creating social contacts

- The social contacts established through employment help an immigrant to accumulate social capital, which is a significant resource in coping in the labour market.
- An unemployed immigrant may have limited opportunities to establish relationships with natives. However, such bridging social capital is important especially when trying to find employment at the professional level jobs (e.g. Ahmad 2015).
- The situation was brighter for those who are inadequately employed: entry-level jobs and practical work training arrangements, for example, can give an immigrant the opportunity to expand her/his social networks.

# Citations: social contacts

*“[in a practical work training] you will be in touch with the people and you will know more about the culture and you could adapt more language and you could adjust many things. It's very useful and I think it's really great chance to be in touch with people, since maybe getting jobs is not so easy as getting internship, so it helped a lot.”*

(a 30–40-year-old man, asylum seeker, Bachelor's degree)

*“I think it's also important, the social environment you get [at work], because, I knew my girlfriend and her family when I came here first, but you need more than that. So we are meeting other people, and then getting other contacts.”*

(a 30–40-year-old man from Western countries, Master's degree)

# Activity and time structure are needed to keep up the daily routines

- The way employment activates a person and sets a rhythm in daily life had a significant impact on participants' psychological and physical well-being.
- Some of those who had been actively involved in working life in their previous country of residence indicated that the feeling of idleness and lack of rhythm in life was a heavy burden for them.
- Inadequate employment, too, can activate and create a time structure to a day, thus enhancing well-being.

# Citations: activity and time structure

*“I think it’s really important just to have something stable that you can actually go and do every day, even if it was delivering newspapers for me, it enabled me to get out, to do something. It made me incredibly fit as well [laughter], which is a nice side bonus. – – overall I would say that it’s really important you have to have something to go to every single day and it gives you good focus.”*

(an under 30-year-old man from Western countries, Master’s degree)

*“It [work] gives you a good balance, a good routine, which you lose without a job. You don’t have a routine, you don’t have a normal biorhythm anymore, you go to sleep at four o’clock [in the morning].”*

(an under 30-year-old woman from Eastern Europe, Master’s degree)

# Conclusions

- Employment seems to be crucial for the well-being of the immigrants.
  - Not only adequate employment, but also inadequate employment, such as part-time work and practical work trainings, may increase immigrant well-being and facilitate their further employment.
- The opportunity that employment presents for increasing one's cultural capital is important in the immigration context.
- Even though short-term periods of employment can substantially promote the subsequent employment of immigrants, part-time work, practical work trainings and pay subsidies proved to be problematic, at least in some cases, with regard to the interviewees' economic adaptation.

# Policy recommendations

- Organizations, both private and public, should open their doors for immigrants.
- Practical work trainings and other forms of inadequate employment can promote immigrants' future employment and adaptation, and therefore they have to be available for as many as possible.
- Also unemployed immigrants need opportunities to interact with Finns in order to learn the language and culture and adapt to Finnish society!
- Bureaucracy related to accepting short-time work assignments has to be simplified in order to prevent employees from getting stuck in a bureaucracy trap.

# *Thank you!*

The research report is available online: [www.polkujatyohon.fi/julkaisut](http://www.polkujatyohon.fi/julkaisut)

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# Limitations

- The results are not generalizable to the larger immigrant population of Finland.
  - Analyzing the connection between employment and the individuals' countries of origin is difficult due to the small sample size.
- Except for those studied here, many other factors, too, may influence the well-being and adaptation to a new country.
- Interviews were conducted only at one time point.