Does making friends with natives create (mis)trust among asylum seekers?

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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 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 investigates the connection between the labor market position of immigrants and their well-being and livelihood.
  - ➤ One of the interests has been to provide knowledge about the long-term economic adaptation of a small group of well-educated, English speaking Iraqi asylum seekers, who were qualified to stay in Finland on the basis of international protection (*N* = 7).

Asylum seekers and adaptation to a new country

- More asylum seekers than ever entered Finland in 2015, the biggest group being the Iraqis.
  - There is a lack of longitudinal studies related to adaptation of asylum seekers in Finland: more information is needed on newcomers' needs and on means that promote their adaptation to a new country.

- When an immigrant comes into a contact with the host country and its representatives, s/he goes through a psychological acculturation process that causes psychological changes, and leads to more or less desirable adaptation outcomes (Berry 1997; Ward 2001; Ward & Kennedy 1993).
  - **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)

Perspectives on trust

- "Social trust is defined as trust in strangers; trust in people with whom we are not previously acquainted." (Herreros & Criado 2009)

- The role of bonding and bridging social capital in facilitating the development of immigrants' trust in the new society (see Larsen 2012).
  - ➢ Strong co-ethnic ties based on mutual trust, i.e. bonding social capital, help a newly arrived immigrant to navigate in the new cultural context (Larsen 2012).
  - ➢ Equal treatment and informal social interactions between minority and majority groups may have bridging qualities for minorities (Kumlin & Rothstein 2007).

- Social trust is strongly connected to well-being, but it is only a part of the overall climate of trust. In addition, trust in police, the legal system, parliament and politicians, as well as workplace trust have a positive impact on individual well-being. (Helliwell et al. 2016.)

Data and methodology

- The data was collected through semi-structured interviews at three different time points during the participants' first 2.5 years in Finland.

- **The baseline interviews (T0)** were conducted between November 2015 and April 2016, when all the participants of the baseline study (*N* = 22; 3 women) were still waiting for their asylum decision in the reception centres or private accommodations in Helsinki or Turku.

- **For the two follow-up interviews**, all those participants having received a positive decision for their asylum request *(N = 7; of which 3 women)* were re-interviewed twice, first in spring 2017 (**T1; approximately 1.5 years after first arriving to Finland**), and then again in spring 2018 (**T2; approximately 2.5 years after arrival**).

Building friendships with Finns

- **At T1**, four participants had managed to expand their social networks and make friends with Finns, i.e. acquire bridging social capital, even though they had stayed in Finland only for approximately 1.5 years.

  ➢ Their socio-cultural adaptation process had started off rather easily and seemed promising regarding their future in Finland.

  "I have quite good relation with my [host] family. I have a lot of friends, who are Finnish. And, I don't know, we are still different, different culture, different thoughts, but we can be so good friends together. We can share everything, we can be open. I think, I have, nice relation with Finnish."

Disappointments in social relationships

- However, **at T2**, three of the four aforementioned participants emphasized that one of the lessons they had learned in Finland was not to trust people blindly.

  ➢ Disappointments in social relationships had changed these participants' attitudes towards Finns on a more general basis.

  ➢ This seems rather contrary to the findings reported previously: informal social interactions, usually promoting bridging social capital and therefore trust (e.g. Kumlin & Rothstein 2007), had created mistrust.

R: There is good and bad [people] in every country. But I didn't expect that I will see that kind of people in Finland. I was thinking that all Finnish people are so kind, so nice, no one want to get benefit of you, no one want to use you, they want just to help you. That's what I thought. But actually I have to think better. And I have to choose people in my life. And be careful who can be my friend, who cannot.

I: Are you talking about personal contacts or are you talking about institutions?

R: I am talking about personal.

I: Okay, so both men and women?

R: More women.

I: That you feel you can't trust? – – Can you explain a little bit?

R: Ah, it's really hard to talk about it.

Participants' trust in institutions

- In general, the degree of institutional trust varied among participants.

- Especially the legal system in Finland was highly respected and trusted.

> *"Law is something… it's above everyone. And it's something really… I admire that law is so important here and everybody respects law and apply it."*

➢One participant became unemployed due to unfair treatment by his employer, and his case went to court. However, he still seemed to hold trust in Finnish employers, and also in the institutions.

> *"I have my case in the court. I trust the Finnish law."*

Mistrust in institutions

- The negative experiences related to institutions were mainly from Kela and the TE Office.

  ➤ The Finnish social security system was appreciated but it has its drawbacks, e.g. heavy bureaucracy related to combining small income and social benefits seemed unfair to some participants.

  ➤ There was very little trust among some participants that the TE Office is capable of helping highly educated immigrants: e.g. the career counselling was perceived too general and impersonal, or the officers' decision-making was experienced as being arbitrary and unfair.

  "I know around seven people who have been doing nothing, just studying and enjoying their time, not trying too hard. And TE Office approved them a master's degree to study. And she [the officer] said "yeah, but you will manage". How can I manage?! Of course, I can manage. If I had a free place to stay and I don't have laskus, I don't need your support money."

Conclusion 1/2

- In this study, informal social interactions with Finns were not as helpful as could have been assumed in creating trust and understanding between the participants and natives.

  ➢ One possible explanation for this may be the Finns' temporary willingness to help asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016. According to some participants, these relationships turned out to be something else than they initially expected.

  ➢ Disappointments and vulnerability in social relationships may have had a negative impact on the participants' well-being and overall adaptation to Finland.

Conclusion 2/2

- Two opposite perspectives from previous studies: institutional trust influences social trust vs. social trust results in institutional trust (Sønderskov & Dinesen 2016).

  - ➢ It seems that the participants' institutional trust may be stronger than their social trust. However, their experiences with the Finnish society and Finns vary, and due to small sample size, generalizations cannot be done.

  - ➢ The interviews should be conducted one more time to get a clearer picture of how asylum seekers' possibly declining social trust affects their trust in institutions, and consequently, their overall adaptation to Finland.

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Thank you!

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