BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING: HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRANTS AND THE MIGRANT HIERARCHY IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT
This article introduces a concept of a “migrant hierarchy,” a framework that is formed from Finnish society’s perceptions of different types of immigrants. The hierarchy places value on immigrants in Finland based on their ethnicity, socio-economic status, and various other interlinking factors, dividing them into differently valued categories. Against this framework, the relevance of such a hierarchy to the everyday lives of highly skilled migrants in Finland is explored, using data from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. The data are used to describe these migrants’ experiences of being categorized and perceived as particular types of immigrants, and the relevance of these experiences to their social lives and their self-defined group identities. The data show, firstly, that highly skilled migrants in Finland are aware of the migrant hierarchy, and that it has an impact on their lives. Secondly, although they object to its homogenizing and hierarchizing aspects, the categorizations of the hierarchy are still internalized to a certain extent, affecting identity constructions. Exploring these issues reveals boundaries that imply underlying problems in regards to the social integration and feelings of belonging by highly skilled migrants in Finland.

Keywords: ethnicity, socio-economic status, social identity, migrant hierarchies, ethnic hierarchies, categorization, group boundaries, alterity, belonging
INTRODUCTION

Any migration experience, whether permanent or temporary, forced or voluntary, results in an abrupt change of one’s surroundings. When migrants, as individuals, arrive in a new country, they are greeted with a whole new social world, in which they must find a place for themselves. This is no easy task: “The experience of migration inevitably redefines frames of reference and calls upon people to reposition themselves within them. [...] Thus, in the new environment that defines them as the ‘Other’, migrants need to redefine and evaluate themselves” (Chryssochoou 2004, 6–7).

What Chryssochoou here refers to as “frames of reference” are categorizations that are imposed on immigrants by their host societies. These are categories such as “refugees” versus “labor migrants” (Huttunen 2004), or “asylum seekers” or “return migrants” (Juhila 2004), but can also refer to more abstract classifications such as “Western” or “ethnic” migrants. Value judgments are always present in such categories, making them inherently hierarchical. They represent the host society’s attitudes towards different types of migrants, and as such can be said to contribute to levels of well-being, the perceived possibility for integration, and the sense of belonging. They also play a part in defining social identities by imposing models of identification: “External, or categorical, dimensions of identification are not only vitally important, but they have been underplayed in most theorizations of social identity. Self-identification is only part of the story (and not necessarily the most important part)” (Jenkins 2000, 10).

This article first looks at existing literature on Finns’ views of different types of immigrants in Finland in order to define what these categories are. I suggest an overarching “migrant hierarchy” that is formed from these categories and in the intersection of several value judgments. Against this background, I then explore what my own ethnographic and interview data (see footnote 3) on highly skilled migrants in Finland show about the relevance of these value judgments and categorizations to the everyday life of these migrants, as well as to their own definitions of their social identities. It is my belief that highly skilled migrants’ perceptions of how they are viewed in Finland do correspond largely with the typology of Finns’ migrant hierarchy. However, even though they are at the top of the hierarchy and seen in a more positive light than other migrants, they still object to both the homogenizing and the hierarchizing aspects of the perceived categorizations. They object to being seen as part of the migrant hierarchy, whose categories inflict upon them a definition that does not match their self-defined identity. Furthermore, as well as defining who highly skilled migrants are, the migrant hierarchy is felt to demonstrate who they are not: they are not “unwanted” humanitarian migrants, but also not Finns. This has consequences for their feelings of belonging to Finnish society.
THE MIGRANT HIERARCHY IN FINLAND

The suggested migrant hierarchy is a situational and relative concept, formed within a dominant “referent culture” (Lewellen 2002, 106) represented by the group that holds the (symbolic or otherwise) power within a given society. In the context of my research, members of Finnish mainstream society represent this referent culture and are, therefore, in a position to impose categorizations on others. These categorizations are based on several intersecting standards related to ethnic background and socio-economic position, as well as cultural, historical, and political factors. Together, they form the overall migrant hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy is the category of “wanted,” highly skilled, and preferably Western, migrants, while at the bottom end of the hierarchy are “unwanted” humanitarian migrants from less familiar cultures.

Constructing the Hierarchy

A large part of how migrants are viewed is based on their country of origin and/or their ethnicity. When asked to name those they think of as immigrants, the Finns habitually refer to a person’s nationality or ethnic group first (Säävälä 2009). People have strong (cultural) stereotypes based on individuals’ countries of origin. Jaakkola’s studies of “ethnic hierarchies” in Finland have shown that the higher a country’s economic standing is perceived to be and the more culturally and visibly similar the Finns feel towards another group, the less prejudiced they are against migrants from that particular country (2005, 2009). However, Suurpää has pointed out that for some groups of migrants, a culturally distant ethnicity can be a positive denominator, provided that they do not try to challenge their appointed role in society: “Regardless of the real strangeness of immigrants, they are conceptually familiar to us as ethno-musicians, or as humorous media personalities in sitcom series” (2002, 117). Furthermore, “Their probable differences do not count; rather, the diversity which they bring with them is seen as an enriching element of social interaction” (118). These “harmless fellows” (Suurpää’s term, ibid.) in Finland include migrants from Western nations, but also, for example, many South American immigrant groups thanks to the positive view of their particular cultural differences, and appreciation for, for example, salsa dancing or Mexican food. As another example, despite vast cultural and visible differences, the Japanese are regarded as notably high on the Finns’ ethnic hierarchy, even above many European nationalities, perhaps because of an appreciation for Japanese culture, design, and cuisine in Finland.

All in all, according to Jaakkola’s studies, the most accepted immigrant (ethnic) groups in Finland are the British, Scandinavians, and (white) Americans, and the least accepted the Moroccans, Russians, Arabs, and Somalis (Jaakkola 2005, 72).1 The eth-

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1 The full list of results of twenty-five different nationalities between 1989 and 2003 can be found in Jaakkola 2005. Unfortunately, Jaakkola’s 2009 study includes only five nationalities (Estonian, Polish, Chinese, Russian, Somalian). However, she states, “Attitudes have turned more favourable..."
nic hierarchy has a direct link to immigrants’ experiences in Finland: it correlates with levels of reported ethnic discrimination, which is most often felt by those lower in the hierarchy. Almost half of Russian immigrants and the majority of Somalis and Arabs reported having experienced racism in public (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, and Vesala 2002; Honkatukia 2005). Newer reports state that racist crimes are most often reported by Turkish immigrants, followed by Iranian, Iraqi, and Somali immigrants—all groups at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, all of whom appear visibly different (Peutere 2009).

Levels of acceptance towards different types of immigrants are also tied strongly to socio-economic factors, i.e., the level of educational attainment and the role of the immigrant in the Finnish economy and labor market; Finns are most accepting of immigrants who hold jobs and qualifications (Salonen and Villa 2006). In Jaakkola’s data from 2007, Finns showed more openness towards foreign workforce members than ever before: 74 percent agreed that Finland should accept more or at least the same number of foreign workers into the country as currently (Jaakkola 2009, 22). However, since then, a biannual Gallup poll commissioned by Finland’s leading newspaper has reported rising opposition to immigration in general (Elonen 2010), and other studies have also shown that, presently, only 43 percent of Finns see increased immigration as a solution to the possible economic and demographic threat that the aging of the population may bring (Haavisto 2012, 2). Despite this opposition, there are big differences of perception regarding what are seen as highly skilled versus low-skilled immigrants: the most welcome migrants are scientists and experts (51 percent would accept more of them), whereas immigrant restauranteurs would be welcomed by only 14 percent (Jaakkola 2005, 18).

However, high educational and employment status alone is not enough to gain acceptance; socio-economic standing and the standards of the ethnic hierarchy are interlinked: “People recognize that Finland needs foreign labor, but not from just any country” (Jaakkola 2009, 88). Heikkilä (2005) has also found that perceived cultural proximity is a factor in the employability of immigrants in the Finnish labor market: “Those immigrants who were labelled as most distant faced the greatest difficulties in finding a job, and thus they were more vulnerable than those with cultural proximity. [. . .] [T]here seems thus to be a hierarchisation in occupational integration on the basis of immigrants’ nationalities” (494–95). Furthermore, the presence of “selective racism” has been noted by Raunio (2002, 154) even in his subject-group of skilled labor migrants, who in Raunio’s study in general come across racism “very little or only on occasion” (153). Attitudes are divided towards even this otherwise appreciated type of migrant depending on how visibly unlike Finns they look.

towards most nationalities mentioned in the survey, but the ethnic hierarchy has not changed” (2009, 88).
Although these interlinking scales of ethnicity and socio-economic status are the most prominent factors in how migrants are valued, there are other additional factors that intersect with these value judgments. Political and historical reasons, such as Finland’s past as part of the Russian Empire as well as the Kingdom of Sweden, may have contributed to the low placement of Russians at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, as well as to the placement of Swedes lower than other Nordic nations. Religion is also a factor in that negative sentiments are directed toward Muslims in general, regardless of nationality (Salonen and Villa 2006). Being a Muslim has become comparable to a cultural trait that is connected to appearance, and it functions, therefore, more or less like a racial category (Huttunen 2004). Gender, on the other hand, is not such a direct denominator in placing migrants on the hierarchy, but rather takes the form of gender stereotypes connected to different nationalities and religions. Examples of this in Finland are the idea of passive and subservient Filipino and Thai wives (Huttunen 2004; Sirkkilä 2006), and the caricature of Russian women as prostitutes (Reuter and Kyntäjä 2006), thereby constructing an image of a “sexualized ethnicity” that is not equally applied to Russian male immigrants (Davydova 2012). Similarly, polarized images of repressed Muslim women, as opposed to Muslim men as the repressors, lead to different views of male and female migrants from the same countries. Furthermore, male migrants in general are seen more easily as threatening and criminal (Honkatukia and Suurpää 2012), or violent (Keskinen 2012).

Issues such as language ability and familial relationships may also have a bearing, although in more complex ways. In the question of language, while knowing Finnish is seen as an important skill in the job market (Heikkilä 2005; Jaakkola 2000), in social life speaking Finnish (with an accent) is not always appreciated: using English, rather than Finnish, in public has been found to result in better service for immigrants (Leinonen 2011), even to the extent that “speaking Finnish with an accent brought about negative responses” (Laurén and Wrede 2008, 21). There is another double standard at play here, too: migrants from Western nations are not expected to learn Finnish to the extent that those lower in the hierarchy are (Latomaa 1998). Therefore, the level of Finnish language skills is not a denominator in the hierarchy in a direct way, but again depends also on the immigrant’s nationality, visibility, and even the reason for being in Finland in very complex ways. There is some evidence that having a Finnish partner also bestows a more positive image on a migrant; those with a Finnish partner are employed more easily (Saartenoja et al. 2009), and Finnish employers trust their skill-level and perseverance in the job more, as compared to those immigrants who have no family ties with Finns (Pehkonen 2006). Yet, at the same time, Finns are even more opposed to immigrants marrying Finns than immigrants coming into the country in the first place (Jaakkola 2005). The linkage to
better employability of immigrants with Finnish partners could in fact have to do with either better Finnish language skills or with social networks (Jaakkola 2000). Apart from the views of laypersons, it should be noted that social policy and official classifications by the state also lend apparent legitimacy to a hierarchy of valued migrants. Regulations about immigration status, work permits, residency, and social benefit allocations “may emphasize the entitlement of those in question to receive resources. Equally, however, [these regulations] may identify them as socially deficient, or lacking in some fashion, labeling them further as ‘undeserving’ or ‘troublesome’” (Jenkins 2000, 19). In a comparison of twenty-one European states’ citizenship and civic inclusion policies, Bail (2008) rates Finland relatively high on all measurements of immigrant inclusiveness at the policy domain. Still, state policies and laws, however fair or lenient they may be, place different types of migrants on a scale from illegal migrants or those with refugee status to temporary residency and work-permit holders, and all the way to those EU citizens who are free to enter Finland and its labor market at the same level as native citizens.

Media also play a significant role in how different types of migrants are placed on the migrant hierarchy. For their part, they contribute to the visibility of specific immigrant groups through discourse (as opposed to physical visibility) (Leinonen 2011). This is especially true, in the Finnish context, in regards to Somalis and Russians (Raittila and Kutilainen 2000). Russians should place relatively high in the hierarchy as a result of ethnic and cultural similarity, but because of their large numbers, they have come to be seen as threatening (Suurpää 2002); levels of acceptance seem to coincide with the media reporting on, for example, “millions of Russians” planning to move to Finland (Jaakkola 2005, 69). As well as these accounts of “floods” of migrants, the media’s readiness to report on crimes committed by immigrants has had a negative effect, among others, on Somalis in Finland. Especially during the 1990s, refugees from Somalia have also been customarily referred to as “welfare migrants”2 (Horsti 2005). As Finns are by far the least accepting towards immigrants coming to Finland “to improve their economic standing” (only 7 percent compared to a 40 percent acceptance of refugees running from war, Jaakkola 2005, 18), it is no coincidence that migrant groups reported on in such ways are at the lower end of the ethnic hierarchy as well. Value-laden categorizations mirrored by changing immigration ideologies are also created, as well as passed down, in the media. The tendency of both journalists and policy makers nowadays to talk about either “good” (working) or “unwanted” (refugee) migrants then trickles down to the level of ordinary citizens, as can be seen from, for example, Internet discussion forums (Simola 2008).

2 The term is elintasopakolainen in Finnish. The use of this word implies that the reason why these refugees come to Finland is to take advantage of the services of the welfare state, rather than to escape an actual life-threatening situation in the country of origin.
In sum, following these intersecting standards of ethnicity and nationality, socio-economic factors related to education and employment, religion and gender, and so on, a “migrant hierarchy” is formed. In its complexity, it is a fluid and elusive scale that hides within it a multitude of differing attitudes by different Finns. Young people, people living in larger cities, and Green Party supporters have been found to be more receptive to immigration in general (Jaakkola 2009; Saartenoja et al. 2009); personal circumstances, such as being unhappy with one’s own life and economic situation, seem to correlate with stricter views (Säävälä 2009); people with a higher educational level and socio-economic status are more positive about the economic as well as cultural benefits of immigration (Haavisto 2012); Finnish women, although otherwise more positive about immigration, have more negative views towards female immigrants than Finnish men (Jaakkola 2009; Säävälä 2009).

However, put simply, at the top of the Finns’ migrant hierarchy is a category of “wanted,” highly-skilled, and preferably Western migrants while at the bottom end of the hierarchy are the “unwanted” humanitarian migrants from less familiar cultures with visible ethnicities. The “wanted” skilled migrants do not face the same discrimination that the “unwanted” migrants lower on the ethnic hierarchy do. They are migrants who are mostly welcomed into the country because they are seen as well-educated, professional people representing the positive side of globalization and multiculturalism, rather than the negative view of immigration flows as a threat to national culture and economy induced by the same globalization.

**Highly Skilled Migrants and the Migrant Hierarchy**

Previous studies of highly skilled migrants in Finland have concentrated largely on the working environment and on economic concerns, ignoring the social sphere and issues related to integration (more on this in Koskela 2010). Even though skilled migrants often arrive in Finland specifically for work, professional life is not enough to provide a basis for a life in a new country. Therefore, a focus on the social life outside of the workplace is important for a more thorough analysis of skilled migrants’ lives in Finland. Researching the subject from the perspective of everyday experiences, as these experiences relate to skilled migrants’ finding a place for themselves within their new environment, allows for more personally felt narratives to come through. Looking past general issues of Finland as a country of choice for skilled migrants in the “global field of choices” (Forsander and Raunio 2009), there are more specific, covert issues at stake when it comes to adapting to and integrating into Finnish society; apart from what the highly skilled migrants think about living in Finland and the Finnish people, a big part in the adaptation process is also played by what the Finns think about the migrants and how the migrants themselves perceive these attitudes. I will, therefore, describe the various ways that feeling categorized and evaluated on a hierarchy (i.e., against other migrants) is discussed in my ethnographic and interview
data collected among skilled migrants living in Helsinki. I will discuss recurring, and therefore central, themes that relate to the Finns’ views of immigrants and the described migrant hierarchy. I believe that this will point to many subtleties and the elusive, yet very real, ways in which the categorizations also affect the everyday life of skilled migrants, even though they are placed at the top of the migrant hierarchy and are viewed in a more positive light than other types of migrants.

Awareness of the Migrant Hierarchy

Categorizations are not abstract concepts; they are actions that become concrete in social interaction, in spoken communication, and even in looks on the street (Juhila 2004). My data show that highly skilled migrants in Finland can easily sense what Finns think about them, including in relation to other immigrants, through social interaction both in the professional world and their free time. However, there is a minority of skilled migrants who say that they have not felt categorized in any way in Finland, nor do they see a hierarchy of immigrants. The reasons for their unawareness are quite clear even to themselves (e.g., “sheltered” workplace, career or family focus, being new to Finland) and simultaneously point to some of the reasons why a migrant could be separated from Finnish society. By “sheltered” workplace I mean transnational companies that are almost societies in themselves to the extent that they offer such a ready-made social world that their employees may state, for example, that they “live in ECHA” (Greece), rather than in Finland. For others, the experience of working abroad can be approached purely as a career move, diluting the desire to socialize with or understand the locals. This type of career orientation may also mean that one does not have the time to invest in a social life:

I used to work my ass off, starting six o’clock in the morning till six p.m. [. . .] then work again from nine o’clock to one o’clock. I mean I already have a very tight schedule for my work that consumes most of my time during the week. When I say most of my time, on an average week it’s

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3 This article is based on data from two years of ethnographic fieldwork by participant observation of the activities of several different multicultural social associations in Helsinki frequented by skilled migrants. These ethnographic data have been expanded upon with informal interviews during fieldwork, and subsequent in-depth, one-on-one interviews. These in-depth interviews included fifteen chosen informants between the ages of twenty-three and forty-two from fourteen different nationalities (several of them dual-nationalities and/or of minority ethnic heritage, e.g., French Pakistani), thirteen different occupations, and a gender ratio of f6/m9. The variation and number of informants encountered during fieldwork is naturally greater. Quotations and examples in the article are from both informal conversations and interviews. When referring to informants, only the person’s nationality is mentioned, unless other information is seen necessary in the context.

4 Apart from ECHA (European Chemicals Agency), in the Finnish context such “societies in themselves” could be international/transnational companies such as Nokia(-Siemens) (also referred to as “Nokia-world” by my informants), Wärtsilä, Kone, and perhaps universities to a certain extent.
around eighty hours. So that means that I don’t have much time left on a
daily basis. (India)

The same could be said about those skilled migrants who come to Finland with
family and dedicate their free time to their home life.

The ways in which migrants become aware of being categorized are subtle.
Therefore it takes time and interaction with Finns to get to the level of value judg-
ments. Newer migrants say that they find Finnish people very hard to read:

I cannot even come to a minimum point to say that I could even guess
what they’re thinking. I cannot even guess because . . . the funny thing
is that her [a colleague’s] appearance sometimes doesn’t match what she
says, so to my perception I cannot make a link. With the Finnish guy
[another colleague], he doesn’t even talk, he’s not even using expressions
when he . . . so you know I cannot even understand from the expressions
what he’s thinking. (Greece)

Raunio (2002) has also remarked on the difficulty of understanding Finns, not-
ing that the skilled migrants associate Finnish modes of interaction with poor com-
munication skills and limited conversation.

However, the vast majority of skilled migrants have a relatively clear under-
standing of what is considered a “wanted” migrant versus an “unwanted” migrant in
the Finnish context. Interestingly, those skilled migrants who have a visible ethnicity
or a nationality otherwise lower in the ethnic hierarchy seem to have a very good idea
of what the overall migrant hierarchy looks like, some even giving specific typologies
that connect not only ethnicity/nationality to specific occupations (e.g., “Indian IT
workers,” “African cleaners,” “working or studying EU-migrants,” “Somalian refu-
gees”) but also take into account reasons for coming to Finland [“Those that came
by love-boat, came for education, came to work, came as refugees” (Kenya)]. It may
be that those with visible ethnicities have had to come face-to-face with feeling cat-
egorized more than those skilled migrants who blend into the Finnish streetscape
because of their similar appearance.

Reactions to the Categorizations
In general, highly skilled migrants see themselves being placed at the top part of the
hierarchy, above, for example, humanitarian migrants. They feel that the Finns’ per-
ception of them is mostly positive. However, they also report that they are seen in a
homogenizing and one-dimensional way as a group, rather than as individuals. The
Finnish imagination is seen as assuming only one obvious way of being a highly skilled
migrant. In its most basic form, this assumption is that a “good” migrant should work
for Nokia and/or be married to a Finn:
What is a good migrant in Finland? Well educated, and probably here for a Finnish spouse. They have a more of a right to be here than someone who’s just, like me, like everyone is just like “Why are you here?” [Laughter.] “You don’t have a husband, you don’t work for Nokia, so why are you here?” (USA, works in education)

This “Nokia Question” is the inevitable question (“So you work for Nokia?”) that most skilled migrants in Finland will encounter at some point. It is an example of a homogenizing assumption that is not meant, nor understood, in a negative way, but it is not always appreciated: in as far as there is no conceptual problem in admitting to being one of those skilled migrants who does indeed work for Nokia, it is often done nonchalantly. It is not something that is seen as a unique or the most positive identification, and certainly not the most central part of one’s identity. Therefore, for many, there is a need to specify, for example by repeatedly stating that one is not yet another Chinese IT-engineer, but rather works in another type of position in the company that makes him different from the “typical” Nokia worker. The question can also prove to be just plain annoying, especially to those who do not work in anything remotely to do with IT, and in something that they perhaps consider more interesting and requiring (more) specialized skills, as in the case of an Indian wind-turbine engineer, who also added that Finnish people are “disappointed” when they find out that an Indian skilled migrant does not work for Nokia, or even in the field of information technology.

Sometimes the answers to the question may not actually correspond to reality; a self-employed Italian migrant says that he does not mind being assumed to be working for Nokia, “like everyone else,” because it makes social interaction simpler (rather than having to explain what he actually does, and also because he is uncomfortable about the fact that he does not pay taxes to Finland). Outside my primary interest group, I have also met a low-skilled British migrant, who was particularly grateful for people assuming that all Western immigrants in Finland work for Nokia, and was happy to let them believe this about himself as well (rather than finding out that he works as a line-cook). He felt that people responded to him more positively if they were allowed to just keep thinking that he worked for Nokia.

National stereotyping is another homogenizing action, and a cause of much frustration. Being seen as a “religious, Bible-thumping, Bush-loving, gun-owning jerk” is made worse only by the apparent unwillingness of Finns to want to look past this particular American stereotype. An Italian informant remarked that Finnish people seem to think that all foreigners that have come to the country are “fair game,” that no matter how irrelevant or negative the national stereotype, it may be reiterat-ed at first meet: “I would not, I would not tell you when I meet you for the first time, you know after a few minutes, you know: ‘Ok, your country is a country where your
prime minister was texting a stripper.” Especially skilled migrants from Western nationalities feel that Finns do not have a desire to get to know them as individuals. The discussions that they have with immigrants are superficial, with the focus on typical foods and the weather and references to having traveled to that country:

I think about the weather, in the beginning it’s always about the weather, and then maybe how is the partying in Spain, and . . . then, maybe, about the work, what am I doing here or something, but not much. (Spain)

This shallowness of interaction with Finns also comes out in stories of feeling like the “token immigrant,” for example, at a party:

I felt like an animal in the zoo, a bit, like you know, everyone’s kind of asking all the same: “Why, why are you here?” and “What are you doing here?” “How do you find Finnish people?” And that’s it! That’s what defines me as a person; it’s like they don’t ask me any normal questions, they don’t want to get to know me better, they don’t want to be friends with me. They might want to practice their English, but other than that it’s like, “Very nice to meet you,” and then it’s like, “I’ve met a foreigner, from America!” (USA)

This superficiality of interaction between members of the host society and immigrants is unlikely to be unique to Finland. However, for the purposes of my argument, these quotes highlight that the issue that highly skilled migrants struggle with is not about feeling that one is not seen in positive terms; instead, the objection here is to homogenizing and stereotyping, to not being seen as individuals. There is a tendency to see immigrants as “faceless characters,” as abstract representations of a category, rather than individuals with their own personal histories and characteristics (Huttunen 2004, 134). Therefore, even when there is nothing negative attached to the generalization, just the homogenizing quality of stereotyping in general can be frustrating. Resistance to categorization is a common reaction, but: “Striving for autonomy of self-identification, is, however, every bit an effect of categorization” (Jenkins 2000, 21).

If highly skilled migrants in general feel categorized one-dimensionally and, therefore, object to the homogenizing aspect of categorization, they still recognize that this homogenizing action is mostly done in positive terms. However, especially those highly skilled migrants who look visibly different from the native Finnish population oppose also the hierarchizing aspect of these categories, as they are negatively affected by the standards of the ethnic part of the hierarchy (rather than seen in a positive light based on their socio-economic status). Although Finns have become more and more favorable towards immigrant workers, especially those viewed as skilled (Jaakkola 2009), being a highly skilled, educated, and employed migrant is
not something that shows on the outside. Those skilled migrants who have a visible ethnicity enter the realm of ethnic hierarchies as soon as they step out of their workplace. A Togolese skilled migrant commented on her meeting new Finnish people: “They just imagine that I’m not working I think, that’s what I feel.” Black skilled migrants may feel that they are automatically assumed to be Somali refugees, but an Indian migrant cannot escape being “dragged down” in the ethnic hierarchy, either:

It is very rare that I have come across that they recognize me as an Indian. [. . .] Finnish people cannot differentiate between Indians and Iraqis and Arabs and Pakistanis [. . .] or even Moroccans.5

Those highly skilled migrants with an ethnicity lower in the hierarchy, therefore, suffer both from the homogenizing aspect of being categorized, as well as the hierarchizing aspect of these categorizations.6

*Pointing the Finger*

Finnish people are seen as unaccustomed to immigration. This is one explanation for the stereotyping and categorizations:

I look forward to that Finland has a lot more exposure to various cultures. [. . .] That’s only going to change to a better positive thing, so these people want to go from person to person, so they are going to interact before they make any perception. (India)

The existence of even negative categorizations is not, however, always blamed on the Finns; many of one’s “co-immigrants/-ethnics” are seen to act in such ways so as to justify Finnish perceptions and attitudes. This can be as small as the shock of discovering that another immigrant from China, after five years of residence in the country, still does not recycle his household waste (and is therefore disrespectful of Finnish customs and shows no sign of trying to adapt), or about more newly arrived members of one’s ethnic group complaining about the weather in Finland [as one should “just get used to it” (India)]. There is a sense of “collective responsibility” (also noted by Pehkonen 2006), whereby any wrongdoing by an immigrant of any kind is seen as possibly affecting all immigrants negatively. However, highly skilled migrants do not necessarily feel actual empathy towards other immigrants, and may demonstrate even anti-immigration sentiments, especially towards refugees. An Indian skilled migrant told me that having received the right to vote at the municipal elections, he had voted for the anti-immigrationist “True Finns” Party, because he

5 These are all groups at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy.
6 There is no denying that ethnicity is a central social marker even for the highly skilled migrants. The intersectionality of ethnicity and socio-economic status is a subject that deserves further research.
agreed that immigrants should not be overindulged (as he himself had “never gotten anything from the Finnish government,” and had still managed to make a successful life in Finland). I have also been told that allowing family-reunifications of immigrant families is just “completely wrong” and an unfair burden on Finnish society. Some of the opinions are very similar to Finnish public discussion. For example, a Russian migrant reiterated these views by saying that the Somalis “do not work, they just stick together and live on social benefits.” However, when another East African skilled migrant refers to Somalis as “not the shiniest coins in the pond,” I assume that we are also dealing with separation from an undesired imposed categorization. Indeed, many of the issues around categorizations concern identities and a need for a self-definition.

**RELEVANCE FOR IDENTITIES**

Following a Barthian transactionalist approach (e.g., Barth 1969), Richard Jenkins (2003) makes a distinction between “groups” and “categories,” according to which a group is our own internal definition whereas a category is an external definition imposed on us by others outside our group. The migrant hierarchy in the Finnish context consists of these categorizations. However, the effects of being categorized by a dominant group should not be underestimated: “The effective categorization of a group of people by a more powerful Other is thus never ‘just’ a matter of classification (if there is such a thing as ‘just classification’). As an intervention in that group’s social world it will, to an extent and in ways that are context-specific, change that world and the experience of living in it; in other words, it has consequences” (Jenkins 2000, 22). By “consequences” Jenkins is referring to the effects that categorizations inevitably have on identities; when migrants are subjected to new categorizations (external definitions) by the dominant group, they need to renegotiate their own group identity (internal definition) in this new environment, as it is inevitably shaped also by the experience of being categorized. Furthermore, a new group identity may also be needed when one’s previous social group no longer exists within the new “frames of reference” (Chryssochou 2004). This is certainly the case in Finland, where the national clusters of many of the highly skilled migrants are very small in numbers and, therefore, no longer offer a ready-made social group with whom to share one’s free time.

**Highly Skilled Migrants as a Social Group**

Previous studies show that highly skilled migrants actually do organize themselves as a social group on the lines of the migrant hierarchy. They seldom organize communally according to nationality; instead, they are more likely to attend multicultural/-national associations founded on a “culture of global economy” (Raunio 2002, 56). This is in direct opposition to other types of immigrants; most
immigrant associations in Finland are single-nation or -ethnic associations, most notably in the case of Somalis or Russians (Sagne, Saksela, and Wilhemsson 2005). This difference may be related to both the larger size of the groups, as well as their position in the ethnic hierarchy, as “unwanted” immigrants at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy seem to have a stronger ethnic identification (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind 1997). This can be seen as both the reason for and the result of their organizing themselves in their own (national) communities, and as a reason why the skilled migrants lack such associations. Skilled migrants are more likely to take part in activities of “friendship associations” (promoting cultural relationship between Finns and foreigners) and “multicultural associations” (organizing cultural/social activities open for everyone) (Sagne et al. 2005). Such social organizations in Helsinki are many. Some are based on a “theme” (e.g., immigrant mothers, business networking, church groups), but most are open to anyone wanting to meet people in a social setting. There is a strong network character to these social circles, and many people know each other through a link to a few people.

This is not to say that all skilled migrants automatically spend all their free time with other skilled migrants. Those with a family with children, for example, may dedicate their free time to family life. Those migrants who have arrived in the country “on a love boat” (i.e., because of a Finnish partner they have met abroad), have a ready-made access to a group of possible Finnish friends and, therefore, already a potentially wider social circle. Some struggle to make any real friends and admit to feeling lonely in Finland. In any case, my data show that skilled migrants actively seek company where they feel equal and un-judged. Only once have I come across a highly skilled migrant for whom this company meant immigrants lower in the migrant hierarchy, in this case visibly ethnic employees of a kebab place, who are “in a similar situation and they have survived here, so why can’t I, and that gives me hope” (India). More typically, what is meant by this company is some form of multinational social groups that includes “educated, internationally minded Finns” (Holland), and/or, in a number of cases, Swedish-speaking Finns. Another related group consists of international students. In this group, it is felt that no unnecessary questions are asked, as one is assumed to be another international student in Finland and the relevance of ethnicity therefore diminishes:

I fit in pretty well, because when I go there [parties organized for/by international students], those people don’t look at me as a Somali or like

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7 The Swedish-speaking Finns are seen as a somewhat separate group, who are more international and open and speak better English than the Finnish-speaking Finns. I have not delved into this interesting issue of having Swedish-speaking Finns as one’s chosen social circle more, but, e.g., Latomaa’s American informants have also remarked that the “[Finnish-]Swedish is a comfortable subculture” (1998, 60).
that, or a Kenyan guy. They say: “Oh, he must be an exchange student,” and I could be from France, who knows, or Belgian. (Kenya)

In anthropological and sociological literature, these types of international social circles are often referred to as “expatriate bubbles.” Fechter (2007) writes about the description of living in a bubble by expatriates in Indonesia as self-segregation into a somewhat artificial, closed world with colonialist undercurrents; the (native) ethnic Other are left outside the symbolic bubble, but it also represents a physical separation from the streets and people of Jakarta (in housing patterns, modes of transport, and choice of venues for socializing). Even though any such “expatriate bubble” in Finland would refer to more elusive and abstract boundaries, there is no denying that, for some, these multinational social circles are the cornerstones of their whole social life in Finland (i.e., their chosen social group). However, others feel that they are “forced” into it because of the homogenizing aspect of the categorizations (i.e., they are categorized as such, and this affects their social options):

The only thing we have in common is that we all speak English and that we’re all here. That’s it! We don’t have anything else in common, but that’s how we’re grouped together. And I often feel like we’re spending time together not out of choice, but like you’re brothers and sisters in a way, you’re stuck together. (USA)

I don’t think there are any other reasons, so . . . people get together just mainly because they are foreigners. (Russia)

There is also a certain sense of escapism involved with attending activities of the multinational social circle, and socializing in these groups is not always seen as a permanent solution to having a social life, but rather just a “breather” from trying to establish a life as part of the Finnish society:

So there were times when I’ve kind of immersed myself in Finnish culture and avoided English speakers just because I wanted the language, and I wanted to feel a part of everything. It feels like kind of diving under water a little bit, but then I have to come up for air and retreat to the expat group, who kind of grudgingly take me back for a couple of months. (USA)

If we return to Jenkins’ distinction between “category” and “group,” the Finnish migrant hierarchy supposes that the highly skilled migrants form a rather homogenic

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8 The word “grudgingly” refers here to an aspect of resentment if one chooses to actively disassociate from the “expat group” and socialize only with Finns, often referred to by North Americans as “going native” or as being a “Euro-whore.”
category: they are assumedly white and from a Western country. Although the international social circles consist of a mix of skilled migrants from a variety of countries and ethnicities, similar ethnic specification can also be seen from skilled migrants’ own self-definitions as a group: those from Western countries often refer to themselves with terms emphasizing their cultural proximity (“skilled Europeans,” “Europeans,” “Western migrants,” “central and western Europeans”), while those with unfavorable ethnicities use wider, ethnically more inclusive economic and ideological terms (“young professionals,” “global citizens,” “internationals,” “expats,” “cosmopolitans,” or just “working migrants”).

Despite these differences in emphasis, the skilled migrants also habitually refer to themselves collectively as “foreigners.” Haikkola (2010; 2011) has also remarked on the use of the term “foreigner” by young second-generation immigrants in Finland as a more positive reinterpretation of an imposed categorization as “immigrants.” However, the issue with highly skilled migrants is not about reinterpreting the category of “immigrants” in more positive terms; it is about separating oneself from a negatively seen categorization while still upholding its existence so that it can serve as a comparison. Therefore, the term “immigrant” is also used, but mostly to refer to something that the skilled migrants themselves are not (e.g., refugees or low-skilled labor migrants) and in definition as their Other.

In this way, both in the skilled migrants’ group definition and the Finns’ categorizations, a distinction is made between those immigrants at the lower end of the hierarchy and those at the top. However, the division between “immigrants” and “foreigners” is not the only boundary that exists for the skilled migrants in Finland; Finns as another group of Others are also very present in the skilled migrants’ discussions about belonging, social identity, and living in Finland in general. Although Finns are not a category in the migrant hierarchy, it is as if implied that Finns as a group are somewhere above (or at least beside) the hierarchy, and therefore inaccessible. “The Finns” in this sense are seen as a closed, homogeneous group that value security, tradition, and the status quo. Their rules are unwavering and indisputable; there is only one correct way of doing things (even as menial as the apparently illogical Finnish custom of always having the kitchen trashcan in the cupboard under the sink, a discussion that I hear over and over again), and by default, only one way of being a Finn. This makes it impossible for a foreigner to be fully accepted as part of the Finnish society. Therefore, even an Indian skilled migrant who is now actually a Finnish citizen does not think anyone accepts him as a Finn. He also believes that even his children will still be seen as immigrants. Talking about a hypothetical situation that he would get into trouble abroad, he laughs:

9 For an applicable review of Finnishness as a (particularly) homogenous and inaccessible entity, and the inflexibility of the category of “a Finn,” see Leinonen 2011, 222–31.
Strange, I have to call the Finnish embassy and say, “I’m a Finn!” “Oh yeah, give me break,” they would say!

However, even Western, white, culturally familiar skilled migrants say that they do not see themselves as a part of the Finnish society, or even see a possibility for this level of integration:

I don’t think it has to do with racism, I think it has to do with being a foreigner, white or black. (Holland)

I think that even if I was whatever [nationality], it would be the same. It would be different if I was Finnish. So everything else except Finnish nationality is . . . different. (Greece)

Leinonen (2011) has also written about the impossibility of becoming to be considered a Finn for Americans migrating to Finland for reasons of marriage. She suggests that migrants coming from Western countries are part of the discourse of (positive) internationalization in Finland, rather than that of (negative) immigration. However, “their privileged status as ‘nonimmigrants’ who are not expected to assimilate or, as in the case of Americans in Finland, even learn the language of their country of residence may in fact amplify feelings of being an outsider” (264).

Whereas, for example, refugees are expected to learn the Finnish language and act according to dominant cultural rules (Latomaa 1998), and therefore as if “become more Finnish,” highly skilled migrants are expected to do the opposite. What skilled (Western) migrants have to offer is exactly the wanted cultural diversity that they bring, as this is seen as an enriching element to the Finnish society. They are not expected to integrate; the “valued Otherness” attached to them creates an expectation to conform to, rather than fight, the stereotypes.

However, one can also feel at home even without feeling part of the Finnish society:

I can say I feel at home here. But I wouldn’t consider myself a Finn. (Germany)

Although I don’t feel part of the society, I’ve started to feel quite at home somehow. (China)

In a way I feel part of the Finnish society, but on a . . . but as a foreigner. (UK)

In this way, at least adaptation to a new social world (rather than a two-way process of integration into the Finnish society) is happening despite the host society’s lack of encouragement for it. Belonging is sought from “the Finnish international society” (Holland) that includes both skilled migrants and “internationally minded Finns,”
and that is seen as parallel to (but separate from) Finnish mainstream society. This, of course, is not the ideal situation; according to Yijälä et al., “increased contacts with the host population and greater exposure to the host culture can promote good intergroup relations and positive attitudes towards the host culture, preventing the ‘expatriate bubble’10 that can separate international professionals from the wider societal context” (2009, 98). As long as the categorizations maintain their strength, this “expatriate bubble” is unlikely to burst.

**Conclusion**

All societies have views of the immigrants living in their countries. Because of culturally, economically, and historically specific reasons, some migrants are more willingly accepted and more valued than others. Based on previous research on Finns’ views of immigrants in Finland, I have suggested how prevalent value judgments intersect to form an overall “migrant hierarchy” that places “wanted,” highly-skilled, and preferably Western migrants at the top, and “unwanted” humanitarian migrants from less familiar cultures with visible ethnicities at the bottom. Against this migrant hierarchy, I have then described the experiences of my interest group of highly skilled migrants about being categorized and perceived as particular type of immigrants, and the relevance of these experiences to their lives in Finland.

Highly skilled migrants are for the most part aware of the Finns’ migrant hierarchy and its categorizations. Although they recognize that they are seen in a more positive light as migrants who contribute to the Finnish economy through employment and to the Finnish society through their “positive” cultures, the skilled migrants still object to the homogenizing and stereotyping character of the hierarchy. In addition, especially those skilled migrants whose ethnicity is visible also feel the hierarchizing aspects and value judgments of the hierarchy negatively, as the hierarchy places them at the lower end by appearance alone without taking into account their contributions to the socio-economic aspects of the hierarchy.

However, despite the felt unfairness of the migrant hierarchy, its categorizations are still to a certain extent internalized. Even though the assumption of all skilled migrants, or all Western migrants, as a homogenous entity is misleading and objected to, highly skilled migrants do feel some sense of unity as a group. This self-defined group identity is constructed, firstly, against an elusive “unwanted immigrants” category and, secondly, against the Finns as their Others. Therefore, the imposed categories in themselves become strategies that are used in identity negotiations, creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. They are also used to represent value judgments: in redrawing their group boundaries, the skilled migrants are

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10 Similarly to Fechter’s (2007) description of the “expatriate bubble” before, Yijälä et al. are here referring to the use of the term by Colleen Ward et al. (1998).
defining and redefining their identities not only as who they are, but also as who they are not: not “unwanted” humanitarian migrants, but also not Finns.

Therefore, although the highly skilled migrants feel that they are perceived by the Finns primarily in positive terms, they also feel that there is a boundary between them and the Finns that is impossible to cross. The “valued Otherness” attached to them means that while other immigrants are expected to integrate by “becoming more Finnish,” the skilled migrants often feel that they cannot integrate into the Finnish society even if they want to; instead of adopting Finnish customs, they are expected to forever act as ambassadors of their native culture, representing wanted cultural diversity as parts of an international, multicultural community. This will further hinder their chances of true integration and belonging to Finnish society.

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