The Process of Cultural Acculturation in Multicultural Workplaces: Experiences of Professional Immigrants from South Asia

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Abstract
This paper develops a theoretical framework and presents findings from a qualitative study of the country, organisational and individual level factors that influence the acculturation orientations that skilled immigrants from South Asia adopt in the Australian workplace. The results of the study have a number of implications for the integration of skilled immigrants into the Australian workplace. Firstly, it is evident that having a national policy which seeks to attract skilled immigrants to Australia itself is not enough. Policies and programs are also required that assist the immigrants to understand Australian workplace culture and expectations and that educate organisations regarding the value of experience and qualifications gained overseas. Secondly, in order to facilitate integration, immigrants themselves need to be open to change.

Stream: Gender and Diversity in Organisations

INTRODUCTION

The severe skill labour shortage in Australia, which is expected to only increase with the ageing of the Australian population, has prompted such concern for the continuing economic wellbeing of the country that the government decided to increase the intake of skilled labour from overseas. The skills immigrants possess, however, are unlikely to be effectively and fully used unless steps are taken to ensure the cultural integration of immigrants into the workplace (Birrell & Betts 2001).

For most of its history, Australia has sourced the overwhelming majority of its immigrants from Europe and most particularly the British Isles--all culturally similar regions. Since the early 1980s, however, more than half of Australia’s immigrants have been sourced from Asia (ABS 2006; Birrell & Betts 2001), and it is estimated that within 15 years ‘twenty-five percent of the Australian population will be of Asian origin’ (Fujimoto 2004: 24). As such, the impact of integration of skilled immigrants on workplace culture has become an important management and policy issue. On the one hand, Australia is facing a debilitating skills shortage, which is now being identified as a serious economic problem. On the other hand, there is much evidence of underutilization and underpayment compared to native-born employees and downward occupational mobility of skilled immigrants despite being qualified for demanding professions (Birrell & Healy 2008; Coughlan 1998; Macken 2008; Shah 2005). Despite
recognition of these issues, no serious study has been conducted to assess the intensity of the problem from individual, organisational and macro policy points of view.

This paper seeks to investigate the process of acculturation of skilled immigrants, specifically accountants from South Asia in the Australian workplace. In the next section of the paper, we provide an overview of the theoretical framework on which our research is based. We begin with an overview of the acculturation process itself and follow this with a discussion of the country, organisational and individual level factors that may influence the acculturation orientations that immigrants adopt. The results of an interview study which sought to investigate the experience of professional immigrants from South Asian countries is reported in the next section. The paper finishes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

The Process of Acculturation

A key determinant of the extent to which skilled immigrants integrate in the Australian workplace is the acculturation orientation they adopt. The process of acculturation can be defined as one in which continuous contact with a new cultural group results in psychological and behavioural changes in an individual. This process is different for all people (Berry 1984). Indeed, four distinct acculturation orientations that individuals can adopt have been identified: assimilation, integration, deculturation and rejection. We suggest a typology in Figure 1 which recognises that in addition to individuals adopting a particular acculturation orientation, so do organisations, and the interaction of these impacts the acculturation process ultimately adopted by the migrant worker.

**Figure 1: Types of acculturation promoted by interaction between migrant and organisational orientation to acculturation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation of immigrant to cultural exchange with dominant group</th>
<th>Orientation of organizations to integrating immigrants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Integration/Democratic pluralism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deculturation</td>
<td>Rejection</td>
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The first two orientations that an individual might adopt are assimilation and integration/democratic pluralism. Both of these orientations entail a degree of integration into the culture of the new country. Assimilation can be said to be a process in which an individual adopts the cultural identity and characteristics of their new country (Nwadoria & NeAdoo, 1996). We suggest that assimilation in the workplace occurs when an individual highly values the culture of the new country and the organisational adopts an assimilation rather than integration orientation toward its migrant employees. Alternatively, when an integration approach is adopted, the individual attempts to become integrated into the larger society while maintaining the characteristics of their home country culture. This orientation is more likely to be found in a pluralistic society in which the dominant culture is accepting of new cultural groups and does not apply pressure on these groups to change. Integration is expected to be facilitated when immigrants value the dominant cultural identity of the organisation and feel their cultural identity is valued by the organisation.

The next two orientations that an individual may adopt are deculturation and rejection. Both of these orientations tend to be adopted when the migrant strongly identifies with the culture of their home country and wishes to maintain this cultural identity and thus a degree of isolation from the culture of the new country. Deculturation tends to occur when the migrant experiences confusion and alienation and strikes out against the dominant culture in their new country (Nwadoria & NeAdoo, 1996). In the workplace context, deculturation is likely to occur when immigrants feel their cultural identity is devalued by the organisation and they are not motivated to adopt the dominant cultural identity of the organisation. Rejection is particularly likely to occur when, despite the organisation’s valuing of immigrants’ cultural identities, the immigrants feel that integration with the organisation’s dominant culture denies maintenance of their cultural identity.

**Country, Organisational and Individual Level Factors Impacting the Acculturation Process**

In this paper, we suggest that the integration of skilled immigrants in the Australian workplace and the acculturation strategy they adopt will depend on a variety of country level strategies, organisational level policies and practices and individual level factors. Figure 2 below depicts our proposed theoretical
framework of the factors that are suggested to influence the integration process and acculturation orientation adopted by professional immigrants.

**Figure 2: Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical construct includes three sets of independent variables: country level, organisational level and individual level. Country level strategies play a role in the acculturation process for a number of reasons. Firstly, according to Portes and Böröcz (1989) both the stance of the government toward immigration itself and the support that the government provides for new immigrants have an impact of the integration of the immigrants into the wider society. Furthermore, Markovic and Manderson (2000) suggest that the degree of support received by immigrants from both government and non-government sources plays a role in the adjustment of immigrants to their new environment. It is reasonable to expect
that the amount of support received by immigrants from these sources once they have arrived in Australia
play a role in determining the acculturation strategy that they adopt.

The second set of variables relate to organisational level policies and practices. While the
governments of a number of countries worldwide, including Australia, have implemented equal
employment opportunity and affirmative action policies that foster the acceptance of diversity in the
workplace, in order to fully utilise the knowledge and skills of diverse individuals, organisations need to go
beyond legal mandates and formulate and implement diversity open policies and practices to accommodate
the integration of diverse employees (Härtel 2004). We propose that this, in turn, will influence the
assimilation orientation adopted by the immigrants.

The final set of variables relate to the individuals themselves. Factors such as whether the
immigrant’s qualifications were gained in Australia or overseas, previous overseas experience and support
received from family and friends, language skills, cultural toughness and personal traits such as attitude
toward change, openness to difference and willingness to integrate should also have a significant influence
on the assimilation strategy adopted by the individual (Bhattacharya 2008; Birrell and Healy 2008;
Luijters, van den Zee & Otten 2006; Mui & Kang 2006; ).

Based on this theoretical framework we propose three key research questions: 1) What impact do national
level policies and programs have on the integration of skilled immigrants into the Australian workplace? 2)
What impact do organisational policies and programs have on the integration of skilled immigrants into the
Australian workplace? 3) What impact do individual level factors have on the integration of skilled
immigrants into the Australian workplace?

As depicted in Figure 2, the relationship between the national, organisational and individual level
factors described above and outcome variables such as skill utilisation, job satisfaction, trust, engagement,
commitment, and advancement within the organisation, in other words, in their overall integration into the
Australian workplace is expected to be mediated by the acculturation orientations adopted by the
immigrants. An investigative qualitative study undertaken to examine the theoretical framework proposed
in this paper is described next.
METHODOLOGY

In the current study, 23 face-to-face interviews were conducted with skilled immigrants from South Asia in order to obtain a holistic picture of their experiences integrating into Australian workplaces and the acculturation orientations they adopted. Qualitative methodology was used as it is more suitable for analysing complex issues of cultural integration. Interviews in particular were selected to facilitate the establishment of trust and rapport and the provision of more in-depth information and clarification (Zikmund 2003).

Sample

Professional accountants were selected for inclusion in the study for two main reasons: Firstly, accounting has been listed as one of the preferred professions for migration under the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in Australia and the government is looking for more qualified accountants with overseas qualifications; secondly the government claims that during 2006/07 the top occupation represented among permanent additions for Victoria is accountants (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2008) and accountants represent a significant percentage amongst South Asian immigrants in Australia.

Potential participants who lived in Melbourne, had migrated to Australia from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka were identified from respective community and professional associations as well as through personal contacts. Attention was given to length of time lived in Australia, in particular, respondents were selected to evenly represent immigrants who had been living in Australia for both less than 10 years and more than 10 years. Following this process, thirty individuals who had immigrated to Australia from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka were contacted to find out if they would be willing to participate in the study. Twenty-three qualified accountants agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews, which ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length. Consent was obtained from participants to audio-record the interview for transcription purposes.

Measures

The interview schedule included questions regarding country level factors such as knowledge of and participation in national and other programs aimed at facilitating integration, organisational level
factors such as experiences related to workplace integration and difficulties faced, organisational factors including organisational climate, organisational involvement, advancement and individual level factors. Questions were also asked to assess the perceived impact of these factors on immigrants’ assessment of such things as the utilisation of their skill utilisation and job satisfaction.

RESULTS

Analytical Strategy

As systematic coding of text is a key feature of sound qualitative analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994), a template approach was used in which the analysis guide reflected the categories and themes relevant to the research question (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Reliability was addressed by using the same interview schedule for all interviewees, independent data coding by two researchers and, the conscious effort by the researchers to put their presuppositions aside during analysis (Cassell & Symon 1994). Inter-rater agreement was nearly 100%.

Profile of Participants

Of the 23 respondents, seven immigrated to Australia from Bangladesh, seven from India and nine from Sri Lanka. Twelve of the respondents had been in Australia for more than 10 years. Eighteen respondents were male and 5 respondents were female. The education level of respondents was respectively Masters degree (62.5%), Bachelors degree (29.2%), Honours degree (4.2%), Graduate Diploma (4.2%). Six respondents obtained their qualifications in Australia. Five respondents had worked in countries other than Australia or their home country. The respondents worked in a range of organisations including accounting firms, public and private sector organisations and academia.

Country Level Factors

Only one of the 23 participants interviewed indicated that they participated in any form of government provided program within their first three years in Australia. The individual that did participated in a program organised by Centrelink, an Australian Government Statutory Agency which provides social security benefits to those in need. The overwhelming view of participants was that there were not any programs provided by the government to assist newly arrived professional immigrants.
transition into the Australian workplace, as illustrated by this comment “what I see is (the government) encourages people to come here but then they are ignored.”

For the majority of respondents, the support and assistance they received when they first arrived in Australia which facilitated their integration appeared to come from friends and informal networks or associations within their home country community in Australia. In regard to settling to life in Australia in general, again, no official support groups or programs were identified by interviewees that assisted them in settling in Australia. Immigrants now have to wait for two years to get any government assistance. However, three respondents indicated that membership to community service clubs such as Rotary International or Lions International did facilitate their improvement in understanding Australian culture, values and behaviour. In addition, three respondents indicated that joining their local church or temple had also provided them with a support network in Australia.

**Organisation Level Factors**

*Experiences Related to Obtaining Employment*

Ten respondents who obtained their accounting qualifications overseas indicated that they had experienced difficulties in obtaining fulltime employment as an accountant in Australia. As put by one respondent, “The challenge is getting your first job, it is really difficult”. Two key issues were identified by the respondents for their difficulties in obtaining employment. The first related to what respondents called a lack of understanding by Australian employers regarding their qualifications and experience. For example, one respondent said: “one (problem) is our qualifications, because most of them don’t consider Sri Lankan chartered accountants as[qualified] chartered accountants here”.

The second key issue related to obtaining employment was the desire of Australian employers to hire people with Australian work experience. For example, one respondent said: “getting a position is really difficult. Actually, that is a really hard thing as a migrant I think because something that I have found, not even just me but my friends have found is that they ask for Australian experience, which obviously we don’t have”.

Highly qualified accountants, who are keen to re-establish a career in Australia often are surprised to find their qualifications and experiences devalued by employers. The immigrants perceived that
employers penalize them for not having local credentials and experience. Interestingly, a number of respondents suggested that dealing with employment recruitment agencies also created difficulties for immigrants seeking employment as accountants. For example, one respondent said: “Get rid of the employment agents.....they are the people that actually are a hindrance to the immigrants settling in some of the cases”. Explaining this further, another said, “the recruiters must move that blockage from their mind that a non-Australian is not good or a non-Australian is not going to benefit Australia”.

**Integrating into the workplace culture**

Whilst nine of the respondents indicated that they did not think that they had any difficulties in integrating into the Australian workplace culture, the remainder of respondents identified a range of issues that they had to adjust to. For many, the first difficulty related to not understanding the local workplace culture and how things are done. As said by one of the Indian respondents, “it took some time to understand how things work in Australia. It is very different as compared to India”. Respondents of Bangladeshi origin said, “there were some cultural misunderstandings”. One of the respondents from Sri Lanka said: “I can see sometimes, coming from my background, from a more polite and.....a more respectful culture where you don’t boast about yourself..... There you respect your boss and don’t argue over things and you abide by the rules but here it is different”. Further elaborating on that point, another respondent from Sri Lanka said: “here you have to tell how good you are, selling yourself.... If you don’t sell yourself, there is nobody to sell you. I found out that in some cases I was better than some people but I didn’t sell that so I didn’t get those opportunities. Actually, another thing is, if you don’t show over-confidence here, then people think that you are not confident. It takes some time to understand these things”.

The second key difficulty respondents identified when integrating into the Australian workplace culture is related to communication issues. As put by one respondent, “always we have problems with communication. In general, that is something everybody has to face I think”. A number of different facets of communication were identified as creating problems. These included such things as responding in a culturally appropriate manner. For example, one respondent said, “the main thing is language. Language means not the ability to speak English but to speak English in a manner which is acceptable to the wider
community..... you should be able to respond in the appropriate manner, not the correct English but suitably. Related to this, the use of slang was identified as a difficulty, for example, “slang language, it was very difficult picking up”. The Australian accent was also identified as being difficult for some people to pick up. For example, one respondent said, “if I think 10 years ago, it was difficult for me to understand the Australian accent”.

An issue identified by two relatively recent immigrants to Australia related to their non-participation in some work functions due to religious practices. While overall they did not think that this had impeded their integration into their workplace, they did indicate that had they attended these types of events, it might have made things easier.

A final issue identified by some of the respondents impacting on their integration into the workplace related to their Australian colleagues making a point of their being different. For example, one person said, “what I see sometimes is that it is the Australians who have an attitude toward the immigrants, not try to welcome them, you know...I always see they are saying the immigrants are not assimilating.....but it is not always the migrant, it is sometimes the way you look at the others”. Similar to this, another respondent said, “they are trying to integrate and what I see is it is not happening, they are not being received properly... you cannot integrate if you are not received properly, if you are not accepted”. Yet another respondent said, “some people are very good...(but) some people are not at all good....They think because you are from a different, because you are a non-Australian that you can’t speak English. So at times, we do get set back and they will try to dominate or try to exacerbate the situation with language”.

It should be noted that while 13 respondents indicated that their organisations had induction programs for new employees to help them to integrate into their new jobs, none of these had components that were specific to immigrants entering the workforce.

Disadvantage and Discrimination in the Australian workplace

A respondent from Bangladesh said, “I felt discriminated; I felt that I was undervalued by my colleagues” while another respondent from India said, “Discrimination is there in spite of your working. If me and my colleague are working on the same task and if we are performing in the same manner and at the
same time, if I am performing better than the other person but still what I am trying to say is being neglected or I have been asked to keep quiet, or my suggestions will be suppressed by the other person when the other person might not have that level of understanding of the stuff which we are doing”. Four respondents indicated that they thought that they had experienced some form of indirect discrimination as illustrated by the following comments, “you can’t say directly that there is discrimination but I believe that sometimes employers indirectly discriminate”. One of the individuals indicated that while he felt it had not disadvantaged him, “there is one particular manager who is constantly trying to bring up that I am Sri Lankan or like, if he doesn’t get his way, then he will say like, ‘speak up’ or ‘speak English’. I know that he is using it because I don’t go away, so he is trying to use any sort of tactic to back me out”. In addition, one of the respondents said that he had not been discriminated against himself but had been in a situation where as a senior accountant he was short listing job applicants and “was told to select people with Australian, white backgrounds, males.....I normally don’t take that seriously but I said no, you can’t do that and that is an insult to me as well as everybody else. So that was the end of it but it affected my trust in them”.

In addition to creating a lack of trust in the organisation, the individuals who directly or indirectly experienced disadvantage or discrimination said that it also created de-motivation, frustration and a lack of commitment which, in turn, can disadvantage the organisation in which they are employed.

Organisational Climate

Overall, 18 of the respondents indicated that they believed that the organisation in which they were employed valued difference and diversity in people and 15 respondents indicated that they believed their organisation had a good reputation as an employer and attracted applicants from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, 15 respondents indicated that there was a good understanding of race issues among staff and appreciation for the advantages of diversity in their organisation, 14 respondents indicated that their organisation had effective harassment policies and procedures and 13 indicated that grievances were effectively dealt with.
Organisational Policies Related to Advancement

Almost all of the respondents indicated that advancement in their organisation was based upon performance and that the same criteria applied to all employees regardless of their background. None of the respondents worked in organisations which had policies specifically for immigrants wanting to enter or advance in management, however, seven respondents did suggest that they thought their organisation would assist them in developing their skills further if they asked them to and nine indicated that their organisation shared information about career opportunities for immigrants. In addition, 11 respondents indicated that they thought their organisation had removed unfair barriers to entry and progress within their organisation. While 14 respondents thought that upper management within their organisation were approachable in regard to seeking advice about career advancement, six thought they were not approachable. Following on from this, 15 respondents indicated that their supervisor would encourage and support them to apply for higher positions and 14 indicated that their supervisor encouraged them to undertake professional development opportunities during work time.

Individual Level Factors

Discussing the importance of the role of individual immigrants themselves in facilitating integration into the Australian workplace, the respondents indicated that, “a lot needs to be done in bringing about equity and acceptance in the workforce (and) the mindset of the people in Australia needs to change”. They also said things such as, “if you don’t educate them, they will never know” and “the best way to educate Australian colleagues about immigrants’ own culture is to make the effort of mixing with them and respect the local culture. This is the best way to break racial, religious stereotypes and prejudices in my view, but it does require some handholding at the initial stage, especially in the working environment.” The importance of persistence and open mindedness of the immigrants in particular was identified. This is highlighted by comments such as: “The key for new immigrants is to have an open mind and the willingness to integrate with the mainstream society and to avoid the ‘us and them’ mentality. This is applicable to the workplace as well.”
**Acculturation Orientation Adopted**

Overall, the acculturation orientations that appear to have been adopted by the participants varied. It appears that the most common orientation adopted was that of integration whereby the individuals indicated that they had integrated into society and adopted characteristics of the Australian workplace culture but also maintain characteristics of their home country culture in their overall identity. It should be noted that participants who had been living in Australia for a longer period of time and/or who had obtained their qualifications in Australia most commonly identified this orientation. The second most commonly adopted orientation appears to be that of rejection whereby participants maintained the cultural identity of their home country culture resisted integrating into the Australian culture. While only one participant could be identified as adopting an assimilation orientation, none of the participants were identified as adopting a deculturation orientation.

It is important to note that the length of time that respondents had been living in Australia appeared to have a relationship with their perceptions of their own cultural identity. Conversely, of the 12 respondents who had been living in Australia for more than 10 years, 10 indicated that they identified aspects of both the Australian culture and their country of origin culture as part of their cultural identity. Of the remaining two, one indicated that they identified their cultural group membership as that of their country of origin and one indicated that their cultural identity was Australian. Interestingly, the individual who indicated that their cultural identity was that of their country of origin, whilst having immigrated to Australia 16 years ago, had returned to their home country for a period of four and a half years in this time.

**Organisational Involvement and Skill Utilisation**

Of the 23 interviewees, nine indicated that they thought their skills were being fully utilised in the workplace while the remaining 14 thought that they were not, with comments such as, “I know at the moment I am working on a special sort of task and I have to complete that job but with my experience, I understand so many things.....with my experience, it is not really utilising my capacity”.

When discussing the skill utilisation of skilled immigrants, one of the respondents went on to say, “I see a lot of people who are immigrants here and I see where they work according to their qualifications
and I see a lot of people, probably a high percentage do not work in the area that they are specialised in when they come here. They work in a different field of work and I think, personally, it is a waste to this country because they don’t utilise the skills and knowledge that they are bringing here”.

Respondents indicated that they face difficulty with the way in which promotions are applied for in Australia as opposed to their home country and that it took some time to understand this system. This is illustrated well by the following comment: “I mean in (South Asian) cultures your superior might guide you. I mean, if you become a subordinate, your superior takes care of you, of all, almost everything and you expect prompts from the superior, e.g. ‘ok now you are ready to apply for the promotion’, that type of thing. But in this system, you don’t find that…..I think a person who comes in from a different background will take time to understand that….it might take about 2 to 3 years to understand”. The absence of a well understood mentoring policy and program put immigrants in a disadvantageous position as they always relied heavily on their superiors for advice in their home country.

Of the 19 respondents who provided information in regard to their current levels of job satisfaction, five respondents indicated that they were very satisfied and four indicated that they were satisfied. Three respondents said that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Two respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied and one respondent indicated that they were very dissatisfied.

**DISCUSSION**

The research undertaken in this paper sought to investigate the process of acculturation and integration of skilled immigrants from South Asia in the Australian workplace. In general, support was found for the proposition that the likelihood of adopting an assimilation, integration, deculturation or rejection acculturation orientation would depend on a variety of national, organisational and individual level factors. Overall, the results indicated that the most commonly adopted orientations were integration or rejection. Interestingly, the longer the participants had been in Australia, the more likely they were to adopt and integration orientation indicating that the acculturation process is not a quick or easy process but rather one that takes place over an extended period of time.
As expected, the national, organisational and individual level factors put forward in our theoretical framework did impact the acculturation and integration process. For example, it was noted by a number of participants that having migrated to Australia as skilled immigrants they had expected that the skills, knowledge and experience that they brought with them would be more highly recognized and valued. Many indicated there disappointment that they were not, however, valued and recognized and this clearly had an impact on their integration in the Australian workplace with a number of the participants having considerable difficulty in obtaining employment and 14 of the participants indicated that they did not think that they were being fully utilized in the workplace. In addition, individual level factors also appeared to play a role in the integration of the participants. Language difficulty is the most critical factor for labour market success. An immigrant’s foreign education, lack of local experience, and limited skill transferability caused more difficulties than expected for accessing positions in their occupation in Australia. Participants that were more open to change and who had the support of family and friends appeared to find it easier to integrate into the Australian workplace culture than those that did not.

The results of this study have a number of implications for the integration of skilled immigrants into the Australian workplace. Firstly, it is evident that having a policy which seeks to attract skilled immigrants to Australia itself is not enough. Policies and programs are also required that will 1) assist the immigrants themselves to understand Australian workplace culture and expectations and 2) educate organisations regarding the value of experience and qualifications gained overseas. Unless policies such as these are employed, Australia will continue to see a de-skilling of their skilled migrant workforce.

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