Immigrants and host nationals at work: Associations of co-worker relations with employee well-being

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A B S T R A C T

The aim of this study was to investigate how co-worker relations are associated with psychological well-being and job satisfaction among immigrants and host nationals working at the same workplace. Among immigrants, we examined co-worker relations with co-culturals, host nationals, and foreign immigrants, whereas among host nationals, we focused on co-worker relations with co-nationals (i.e. co-culturals) and immigrants. The study was conducted as a survey, of which the response rate was 45%. The participants consisted of immigrant ($n = 164$) and host national employees ($n = 186$) in a transport company (in Finland), the majority (90%) of whom were men. Co-worker relations were measured with a composite score, tapping broadly positively experienced relations and their frequency as well as the desire to interact with a defined group of co-workers. The results showed that all kinds of co-worker relations were positively associated with psychological well-being and job satisfaction. However, the co-worker relations between host nationals and immigrants were more strongly associated with job satisfaction than relations between these and other co-workers. Thus, attention should be paid to fostering the development of positive intercultural co-worker relations, as this may positively impact immigrant as well as host national employee well-being; job satisfaction in particular.

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1. Introduction

Western workplaces are becoming more culturally diverse due to increased migration and the international mobility of today's workforce. Employees are thus increasingly working together with people from other cultures. So far, studies on the effects of ethnic work group diversity have mainly focused on work group outcomes such as productivity and creativity; studies on interethnic relations and social interactions at the workplace have been less frequent (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Even less attention has been paid to how social relations in culturally diverse workplaces are related to the well-being of employees, and to the ways in which co-cultural and inter-cultural co-worker relations associate with employee well-being.

An impressive body of research, conducted mostly monoculturally in Western cultures, suggests that social relations and social support at work are predictive of both employees' general well-being and work-specific well-being, of which job satisfaction is an example (e.g. Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; De Bacquer et al., 2005; Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Stansfeld, Fuhrer, Shipley, & Marmot, 1999). The quality of social relations at work is one of the central factors in several work stress

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theories (see Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). It has also been argued that social relations are of paramount importance for well-being, because people have an innate need for social interaction, connectedness and to be accepted; that is, a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Co-worker relations, regardless of their cultural source, may fulfil this need. Positive intercultural co-worker relations may also have an additional beneficial effect on well-being, by teaching the immigrant about the new country's culture. In a culturally diverse workplace, these relations may offer helpful resources not provided to the same degree by co-cultural relations. In this study, by immigrants we mean all those who are foreign born, of foreign descendent and are residing in a host country for an extended period of time, excluding expatriates on assignment, international students and long-term tourists. By host nationals we mean native born nationals; this does not include second generation immigrants.

On the basis of cross-cultural adjustment theorizing (see Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), we expect that co-worker relations with host nationals may be especially important for immigrants to thrive at a workplace. These relations may provide assistance and opportunities to learn the norms and rules of a host cultural workplace. We argue that when a significant share of co-workers consists of immigrants originating from cultures other than those of host nationals, this will change the social environment in complex ways, which will also affect host nationals. Thus, research on the associations of co-cultural vs. intercultural co-worker relations with well-being among host nationals is also needed, even if this has not previously attracted much attention in research.

In sum, this study adds to the existing literature by investigating intercultural and co-cultural co-worker relations and their associations with immigrant and host national employees' psychological well-being and job satisfaction. This knowledge is important for understanding social relations as well as for finding ways in which to enhance employee well-being in culturally diverse workplaces.

2. Association of co-worker relations with well-being

2.1. The need to belong and employee well-being

Social relationships – whether conceptualized as social integration, social networks, social ties or social support – have shown to have powerful effects on individual well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000). The aspect of social relations at work that has been studied most often within work and organizational psychology, including occupational health, is the amount and quality of social support. Several longitudinal and prospective studies have shown poor social support at work to be predictive of impairments in well-being (e.g. De Bacquer et al., 2005; Niedhammer, Goldberg, Leclerc, Bugel, & David, 1998; Stansfeld, Clark, Caldwell, Rodgers, & Power, 2008; Stansfeld et al., 1999).

Meta-analyses have shown that co-worker and supervisor support is also an important antecedent of job satisfaction (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Job satisfaction refers to work-specific well-being, and is defined by Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012, p. 347) as "an evaluative state that expresses contentment with and positive feelings about one's job". While job satisfaction is important as an aspect of employee well-being per se, it is also of interest because meta-analyses have shown that poor job satisfaction associates particularly with workplace withdrawal, in the form of, for example, absenteeism and turnover intentions (Fried, Shirom, Gilboa, & Cooper, 2008; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993).

It has been proposed that social support from colleagues and supervisors has both direct and indirect positive effects on well-being. The evidence to date, however, lends more support to a direct relationship between these two, at least with regard to psychological well-being and job satisfaction (de Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003; Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010), which are the well-being outcomes examined in the present study. The reason for this direct, as opposed to an indirect, effect of social support on well-being could be that social support is primarily effective because it partly fulfils an essential psychological need for social inclusion and belonging. Social belongingness has been viewed by several scholars as a fundamental and innate psychological need, the fulfilment of which is important for well-being (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). That satisfaction of the need to belong – or the need for relatedness, as Deci and Ryan (2000) name the construct – is universally associated with greater well-being, has received support in some cross-cultural studies (Church et al., 2013; Sheldon, Cheng, & Hilpert, 2011).

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), satisfaction of the need to belong involves two criteria; firstly, frequent and positively experienced interactions with people, and secondly that these interactions take place in the context of stable and enduring relationships. Working adults spend a large part of their time at work, where they interact with the same co-workers for extended periods of time. The workplace thus provides a context in which the need to belong can be satisfied, to varying degrees. We expect that the need to belong of employees who have positive co-worker relationships and frequently interact with these co-workers is more likely to be satisfied. Therefore the psychological well-being of these employees is better and they are more satisfied with their jobs than employees who lack these kinds of co-worker relations. Moreover, we believe that the cultural source of co-worker relations does not necessarily affect their ability to satisfy the need to belong. Thus co-cultural relations, as well as intercultural relations, are also positively associated with employee well-being and job satisfaction.

H1. Among host nationals, co-worker relations with co-culturals (H1a) and immigrants (H1b) are positively related to psychological well-being (H1a1–H1b1) and job satisfaction (H1a2–H1b2).