



Perceived ethnic discrimination at work and well-being of immigrants in Finland: The moderating role of employment status and work-specific group-level control beliefs

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Abstract

The study examined the role of work-specific group-level control beliefs in explaining the negative impact of unemployment and perceived discrimination in working life on psychological well-being and self-rated general health among immigrants. A nation-wide probability sample consisted of 1783 immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Russia and Estonia living in Finland. Domain-specific (work environment) perceived discrimination and group-level control beliefs were assessed. The group-level control beliefs reflected beliefs about the immigrants' general ability to control their employment opportunities. The results revealed that perceived discrimination predicts negatively, whereas work-specific group-level control beliefs predict positively psychological well-being and self-rated general health among the immigrants studied. The moderating role of group-level control beliefs appeared in a three-way interaction with employment status and perceived discrimination. At particular risk for psychological symptomatology and lowered health status as a result of perceived discrimination were those immigrants who were personally unemployed but still believed in the efficacy of immigrants' own skills and effort in acquiring employment. It is concluded that it is necessary to separately assess controllability appraisal on the one hand and intra-group variation in disadvantage on the other in order to better understand the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being. The long-term consequences of unemployment, group-level control beliefs and perceived discrimination for the well-being of immigrants are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the role of controllability appraisal in explaining the negative impact that perceived discrimination has on psychological well-being and health among immigrants of Russian and Estonian backgrounds in Finland. In comparison with the other Nordic countries and the rest of Europe, Finland has until quite recently been largely insulated against the consequences of massive migration. It is only in the 1990s that larger numbers of immigrants have been making their home in Finland, when the status of returning migrants or repatriates was accorded to those people in Russia, Estonia and other parts of the former Soviet Union who are of Finnish descent. Although the number of foreigners in Finland has tripled since 1990, it is still proportionally the smallest in Europe. At the end of 2003, the total number of foreign nationals in Finland was 107,003, forming 2% of the total population (Statistics Finland, 2004). Russian- and Estonian-speakers form the largest immigrant (non-citizen) group in Finland. At the end of 2002, there were 24,277 Russian citizens, 1994 citizens of the former Soviet Union, and 12,405 Estonian citizens in Finland, making up about 40% of the total immigrant population (Central Population Register, 2003).

The domain chosen for the focus of this study is the work environment as perceived by the immigrants themselves. Employment in the country of settlement is always a challenge for first-generation immigrants, and the rate of their unemployment is generally significantly higher than among the host population. Also, the integration of Russian- and Estonian-speaking immigrants into Finnish society has been far from smooth. On the one hand, problems arise from a lack of human or material resources, which prevents immigrants from functioning as full members of society, and on the other hand, they encounter intentional or unintentional discrimination (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Vesala, 2002; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk, & Schmitz, 2003). According to an estimate by the Ministry of Labour (2004), these immigrants suffered, despite their generally high educational level, in 2003 from a considerably higher unemployment rate (40% among the Russians and 19% among the Estonians) than the host population (9%). Struggling to find a suitable job adds to the acculturative stress experienced by immigrants (Aycan & Berry, 1996), but perceiving ethnic discrimination in the labor market and at work can make it a double stressor.

2. Perceived discrimination and well-being

A consistent finding emanating from recent empirical research is that ethnic discrimination and prejudice play a major role in the adaptation and acculturation process of immigrants as such experiences clearly diminish the physical and emotional health outcomes of immigrants. Negative effects have been observed when studying immigrants' experiences of discrimination in every-day life as well as their perceptions of discrimination in the work environment (James, 1997; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000a). Specifically, perceived discrimination has been found to predict different dimensions of immigrants' psychological well-being or health, such as depression (Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999; Pernice & Brook, 1996), distress and anxiety (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Pernice & Brook, 1996); acculturative stress symptoms (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2002; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000a); life-satisfaction (Brown, 2001; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000b; Ying, 1996);

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