



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Cross Cultural Competence Development in the Public Sector

“The Exploration of Work Related Cross Cultural Encounters and Learning in the
Work Place”

Master's Thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour Relations

Department for Sociology/

Department of Business Administration

Author: Carolyne Kako

Supervisor: Harald Dolles

Semester: Spring 2016

ABSTRACT

Master Thesis in Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations 30 hec.

Purpose: To study and analyze how cross cultural encounters at work enhance cultural learning make employees culturally competent in order to increase knowledge about cultural competence development in the public sector.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework of this study is based on two understandings: Firstly, on cross cultural encounters at work as interpersonal cultural interactions or experiences. Secondly, on cross cultural competence as cultural knowledge and skills learned. Two learning theories; Experiential Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory are employed to understand and explain the development of cross cultural competence at work.

Methodology: A qualitative study with a narrative and interpretative approach based on in depth open ended interviews is used. Narratives of 10 interviewees with 3 or more years of work experience within a culturally diverse work environment in the public sector were studied and analyzed.

Results: The findings of this study reveal that cross cultural encounters in the work place provide a means of stimulating cultural learning and enhance employees' cultural competence. The respondents in this study report growing their cultural competence through learning from previous cross cultural experiences and the daily cultural interactions in their working life. They identified specific personality traits that are essential for this process.

Key words: Cross Cultural Competence, Cross Cultural Encounters, Cultural Learning, Competence Development, Cultural Skills, Cultural Knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My appreciation goes to all respondents for this research study for the valuable time and information offered through the interviews. I extend my gratitude to my supervisor Harald Dolles for the input and guidance he offered me through the thesis writing period. It went along away in enabling me produce a great research result and report. I am extremely grateful to the Swedish Institute for granting me a scholarship to study in Sweden. My studies would not have been possible without their generous financial support. I am forever indebted to my family for their unwavering support through the different seasons of my life. In a special way, I would like to appreciate all my friends who have been supportive in various special ways. Above all, I owe it all God!

Table of contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Background and Problem Statement	1
1.2	Purpose and Research Questions	3
1.3	The Labour Market and the Swedish Employment Service	4
1.4	Disposition.....	5
2	Links to Previous Research.....	6
3	Theoretical Framework.....	9
3.1	Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).....	9
3.2	Social Learning Theory (SLT)	11
4	Methodology.....	15
4.1	Rationale behind chosen methodology.....	15
4.2	Case Selection.....	15
4.3	Interview Guide and Data Collection	18
4.4	Data Analysis.....	19
4.5	Data Quality Concerns and Ethical Considerations	19
4.6	Limitations.....	20
5	Empirical Findings and Analysis	21
5.1	Experiential learning.....	21
	Cross Cultural Encounters as Learning Experiences	21
5.2	Social Learning.....	28
	Cross Cultural Encounters as Social Learning Interactions.....	28
6	Discussion	33
6.1	Developing Cross Cultural Competence through Cultural Experiences	33
6.2	Developing Cross Cultural Competence through Social Interactions	36
7	Conclusion	40
7.1	Implications towards industry and individuals.....	42
7.2	Suggestions for further research	44
8	References.....	45
9	Appendix	53
9.1	Appendix A- Interview Guide	53
9.2	Appendix B- Data Coding process of empirical findings.....	55

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCC
SLT
ELT

Cross Cultural Competence
Social Learning Theory
Experiential Learning Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a background to the research topic and establishes the rationale of the research by stating the purpose and research questions that are guiding this study. It also gives an overview of the structure of this research report.

1.1 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The ongoing trends towards immigration and globalization of the labour market have led to greater interpersonal cross cultural encounters and heightened cultural concerns which raise critical investigation about the fundamental competence that the public sector may need to deliver culturally appropriate and responsive public programs and services (Black et al., 1990; Rice, 2010; Primecz et al., 2013; Kaufmann et al., 2014). Employees no longer work solely in the comforts of their home culture but are involved in interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Lynch et al., 2004, Harzing et al., 2011; Ghosh, 2013). These encounters occur in a variety of work related situations including meetings with clients or fellow staff, work teams, short term business trips or even long term international assignments (Earley & Peterson, 2004; Adler, 1987).

In Sweden, there has been a huge inflow of large communities of refugees and immigrants from culturally diverse backgrounds. In 2014, the country's population grew by more than 100,000 people as a consequence of the high immigration record of over 127,000 people (Statistics Sweden, 2014; Sweden and migration, 2015). Subsequently, during the daily work operations at a public agency between the recipients or clients and the employees, there is a heightened likelihood of interactions occurring between individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, practices and language (Mitchell, 2007). A clear example is that of the Swedish Public Employment Service- a central actor in society that is mandated to work for

the common good of all. Out of the agency's 10,521 full time employees, 8,300 employees are reported to have direct interaction with employers and job seekers from diverse cultural backgrounds (Public Employment Service, 2011, 2015; Sieck et al., 2013). By virtue of being a public institution, it is mandated to be a legitimate actor and work for the common good of all by delivering culturally appropriate and responsive services. This thesis teaches us that a focus on developing employees' cultural competence in the public sector can increase public institutions' ability to work with culturally diverse groups of people in the delivery of public services and programs.

Despite cross cultural encounters becoming typical of today's public sector, there almost no studies that have addressed this phenomenon. There is little research exploring how work related cross cultural encounters may make employees culturally competent at work. This gap has had a serious negative implication of narrowing the scope of the subject to mainly expatriation within multinational companies (Lenartowicz et al., 2014; Wood & Peters, 2014). Besides, mere knowledge and awareness of cultural differences offers no guarantee for alleviating one's deep seated stereotypic representations of other groups until cross cultural encounters take place (Bruno, 1996). When employees lack cultural competence, cultural conflicts arise, relationships can be damaged, projects may flop and organizational talent may be lost to other firms in the labour market (Ramburuth & Welch, 2005). Moreover, when cultural knowledge and understanding is ignored and not considered in the public sector's administration and delivery of its services and programs to the groups that can best utilize them, individuals may miss out on getting the services or support that best suits them or better still, they may receive services that are perhaps more inappropriate than helpful (Mitchell, 2007).

This study takes a narrative and interpretative approach to study and analyze employees' cross cultural encounters in the public sector. The pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of these encounters from an employee perspective will open up broader avenues for understanding the potential cultural learning embedded in such encounters that can aid the development of this greatly needed competence. This knowledge will help professionals in the public sector to be better prepared to do their job and will inform the development and integration of specific culturally sensitive practices, policies and standards to increase the relevance of the public sector's services and programs to various culturally diverse individuals and groups that utilize them.

1.2 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to study and analyze how cross cultural encounters at work enhance cultural learning and make employees culturally competent in order to increase knowledge about cultural competence development in the public sector.

In this study, I will focus on cross cultural encounters at work as interpersonal cultural interactions or contacts. In order to achieve the above purpose, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are cross cultural encounters at work experienced and perceived by employees in the public sector?
2. How do cross cultural encounters at work enhance employees' cultural learning and competence development in the public sector?

These research questions will be investigated by means of a case study within the Swedish Public Employment Service. To begin with, a brief background to the labour market and the

Swedish Employment Service is provided to offer an overview of the public sector agency where this study was conducted.

1.3 THE LABOUR MARKET AND THE SWEDISH EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

In Sweden, it is reported that approximately 4 million people are members of the labour force and of these about 220,000 are foreign nationals (Sverige & Sverige, 1973). From 2006 to 2012, the considerably higher immigration to Sweden than the historical average, led to an average addition to the labour force of up to 20,000 people per annum as a result of the population changes (OECD Indicators of Swedish labour market, 2012; Statistics Sweden 2014). According to the new obligation issued in 2010, the employment service is required to give support to people with a weak position on the labour market until they find a job. This category includes new immigrants who originate from different cultural backgrounds, people with disabilities, people with long term sick leave and the young people (Public Employment Service, 2015).

The agency renders professional assistance to job seekers on the labour market by effectively connecting job seekers to employers with high priority being offered to those distant from the labour market. For instance, they offer job seekers support, and tips to help in writing resumes, preparing for interviews and provide up to date information on the labour market as well as career planning (Public Employment Service, 2013 & 2015). Although employees at this agency are tasked with the main role of coming alongside job seekers, supporting and linking them to employers so that they can find employment, the agency highlighted this responsibility to be its major challenge (Public Employment Service annual report, 2011).

To say that the agency faces pressure to achieve a balance between mediating competence and maintaining as a legitimate actor in responding to an increasingly multicultural labour force

wouldn't be an underestimate (Mitchell, 2007). It is a central actor in society that needs a work force with cultural competence to effectively achieve its goals in society. Moreover, researchers report that public managers and staff contribute enormously to the overall effectiveness in government institutions and hence their contribution should not be taken lightly (Witte 1936; Rikard & Lars 2005; Mitchell & Rice, 2007). It is from this background that this research found a public sector agency to be a unique context for a study on cultural competence development.

1.4 DISPOSITION

The structure of this research report is as follows: First, previous research on developing cross cultural competence is chronologically mapped out capturing major themes and assumptions. Second, the theoretical framework based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) is described portraying its relevance to the study of cross cultural competence. Third, the research methodology employed is explained justifying the choice of methods and case selection. Fourth, the empirical findings are presented, analyzed and discussed. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for future research will be suggested.

2 LINKS TO PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In this section, I will draw on previous research to review major concepts of cross cultural encounters, cross cultural competence and important aspects that have shaped the academic discussion around CCC development.

Cross cultural encounters have been identified to be contacts and interactions of various types between people from different cultural backgrounds and a process of engaging in cross cultural interactions with individuals or clients from culturally diverse backgrounds (Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Studies show that cross cultural encounters provide a huge opportunity for fundamental cultural learning as some individuals tend to make use of such opportunities to learn new cultural skills that they didn't possess prior (Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013). People who have worked and lived in culturally diverse work environments are reported to have reaffirmed their identity more closely compared to those who have lived in mono cultural environments (Kosmitzki, 1996). Sizoo et al (2005), found culturally sensitive employees in service industries to be higher in attentiveness, interpersonal skills and social satisfaction than their counter parts when there faced with cross cultural encounters.

Previous research also reveals that fewer cultural learning opportunities may lead to lower levels of socio cultural adaptation which may hamper the learning and development of cultural skills (Ong & Ward, 2005). In addition, other researchers believe that improving cultural training programmes for both expatriates and domestic employees and sending employees on short term assignments in international locations helps to build CCC (Montagliani & Giacalone 1998; Wood et al., 2014; Wurtz2014). According to Lenartowicz et al (2014) experiential learning and cross cultural experiences are what matters when it comes to developing cultural competence. Furthermore, authors like Kaufmann et al (2014)

believe that developing and acquiring cross cultural competence is a much more complicated and long term process which takes time, experience and willingness to learn.

Several scholars have identified a substantial overlap between CCC and other similar concepts for instance adaptation, adjustment, cultural intelligence, cultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, multicultural competence, intercultural competence and a global mindset which all describe the capabilities to interact effectively with culturally different others (Benavides & Hernández, 2007; Johnson & Borrego, 2009; White & Shullman, 2012; Wang et al., 2014). For the purposes of this research report, the term cross cultural competence is used as synonymous with the highlighted similar concepts.

The literature reviewed on CCC portrays it as a skill set comprised of various characteristics which may entail attitudes, attributes, knowledge or even behavior. In their study of “Intercultural Effectiveness”, Hammer, Gudykunst & Wiseman (1978) were some of the earliest researchers to attempt to define and describe the concept. They launched by asking North American Sojourners about the skills and knowledge needed for Intercultural Effectiveness. 24 abilities were identified out of which a 3 Factor Model of Intercultural Effectiveness highlighting 3 competencies was developed: a).The ability to manage psychological stress, b).The ability to communicate effectively and c). The ability to establish interpersonal relationships. Later, other scholars suggested that CCC entails dimensions of sensitivity, awareness as well as skills. According to Bennett’s (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the necessary skills for developing CCC are explained in terms of one’s experiences, beliefs and behaviors. Research from Abe & Wiseman (1983); Deardorff (2006), highlights that CCC is based on the analytical and relational skills, specifically the ability to understand others’ world views and interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Some researchers advanced the discussion by linking the necessary skills and knowledge for CCC to multicultural personality traits for example the four elements of confidence, hope, optimism and resilience were identified to be key traits in assessing employees' CCC and developing skills for potential placement in culturally diverse settings (Wu & Bodigerel, 2013; Dollwet & Reichard, 2014). Current research on developing CCC focuses mainly on sensitivity to cultural differences as well as the ability to adapt to other different cultural environments maintaining that individuals need dare to lower their defenses, take risks and practice behaviors that may feel awkward and unfamiliar (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). According to Johnson et al (2006), it requires a flexible mind, an open heart and a willingness to welcome alternative perspectives with an awareness of its deliberate influence on one's thoughts and behavior.

Another common focus for many scholars over time has been on the ability to understand, serve and work effectively well with others regardless of their cultural backgrounds, differences or needs (Adler, 1983; Perry & Southwell, 2011). According to Ghosh (2013), a culturally competent person is expected to possess strong personal identity, knowledge as well as show sensitivity and compatibility with the beliefs and values of other cultures. Moreover, several researchers have called attention to possible conflicts, difficulties and frustration that occur to workers when they are confronted with two different cultural backgrounds emphasizing the need to invest in cultural knowledge and learning in order to work effectively in culturally diverse work places (Chang 2007: Ramburuth & Welch, 2005; Som 2009). This study seeks to add to the rich findings of previous researchers by exploring the phenomenon through an analysis of work related cross cultural encounters in the public sector.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since this study has a focus on cross cultural encounters as interpersonal cultural interactions and cultural competence as cultural knowledge and skill learned, a blended theoretical framework of two learning theories namely, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and the Social Learning Theory has been adopted. This chapter explains the two theories by demonstrating how they facilitate a deeper understanding of developing cross cultural competence and why their complementary application is specifically relevant for this study.

3.1 KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Kolb's ELT views experience as a source of learning and development. He primarily built on the work of Dewey (1938) who identified and recognized the importance of experience in learning, Piaget (1970) that apprehended of intelligence as mostly a result of interaction of individuals with the environment and Lewin (1952) who affirmed active participatory learning. Kolb emphasizes some unique perspectives on learning and development; first, that learning is a process. This is consistent with the research questions for this study which seek to understand how cross cultural encounters at work make employees culturally competent. This is a process that takes time, learning and experience. Second, ELT, views learning as a holistic process of adaptation to the world that involves the integrated functioning of the whole individual – thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving as well as interaction between the person and the environment. This holistic nature fits perfectly well with the complexity of cross cultural encounters and the multitude of demands from the increasingly multi-cultural environment which employees and agencies must adapt to. Third, ETL views learning as a continuous process grounded in experience where, relearning and integrating old and new ideas are crucial aspects of development. This emphasis on a continuous cycle of learning is exclusively significant for employees in this era given the increasing globalization and

cultural diversification of the environment. It points to flexibility and openness in enhancing continuous competence development of any kind (Kolb, 1984).

Kolb (1984) prescribes a process of learning where an individual should undergo 4 stages including; *experiencing*, *reflecting*, *thinking* and *acting* in order to transform an experience effectively into learning. The model argues that *Concrete Experiences* which means encountering a new experience or a reinterpretation of an existing experience are a basis for *Reflective Observation* which involves reviewing and reflecting on the experience with the goal of identifying inconsistencies between the experience and the possible understanding. Thirdly, Kolb identifies *Abstract Conceptualization*, to be a stage where the interpretation, concluding or learning from the experience takes root drawing from the preceding reflective stage. He argues that this stage gives rise to a new idea or modification of the existing abstract concept. Finally, this understanding becomes the basis for action *Active Experimentation*. It involves trying out what has been learned and applying it to the environment around to see what results are produced and then the process continues to produce effective learning. These stages are illustrated in figure 1 below:

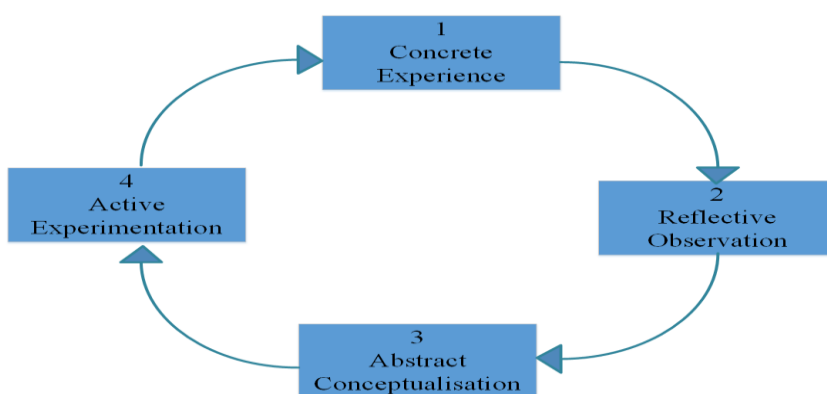


Figure 1: A line drawn structure with elements of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle

The scope of Kolb’s work is broad and the abstract quality of his theory has enabled it to be extensively applied to an array of learning needs. For example Atkinson et al (1988), applied

Kolb's ELT to career exploration as a process of generating and assimilating career information relating to self, Sims (1983) used the theory to assess an individual's skills and his or her job requirements to understand the need for commensurability between the person and the job and Kok-Yee et al (2009), applied the theory to propose a model that focuses on how leaders translate their international work assignment experiences into learning outcomes critical for global leadership development .

It is evident that Kolb's ELT has been notably applicable in instances in which consideration to the experiences and the process has been as equally important as attention to the outcome. Developing CCC is a great example of such an area where the cross cultural encounters at work are perceived to be as significant as the outcome, namely, the potential cultural competence that may be developed. The cross cultural encounters being explored are likely to form concrete experiences in individual working lives of the employees. Investigating such encounters with the goal of finding out how they make employees culturally competent to be effective in culturally diverse environments makes Kolb's ELT beneficial in understanding and explaining the basis of the respondents' reflections and perceptions regarding their experiences and how they translate into the highly needed cultural knowledge.

3.2 SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

The Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) asserts that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. He proposes that individuals learn from their environment either from interacting with different individuals or observing other people's behavior. He assumes that learning occurs in interpersonal contexts in the environments in which individuals interact. The primary focus of this theory is on learning as *social participation*. Hence learning does not rest with the individual but rather a process of social participation situated in a context for example a cultural or historical context (Bandura, 1977).

According to Bandura (1977), there are four specific assumptions as to what matters about learning and from which general principles and recommendations for learning and understanding of competence can be derived namely: 1). we are social beings and thus this fact is central to learning. This is consistent with this study's exploration of cross cultural encounters experienced by employees in the context of a work place. 2). Knowledge is a matter of competence. This assumption fits well with the conceptualization of cross cultural competence as a set of skills and knowledge that have to be learned. 3). Knowing is a matter of participating in the active engagement with the world through which this competence is developed. This relates to the claim of this study that cross cultural encounters in the work place provides a platform of enhancing cultural knowledge of the employees. 4). Meaning, in the sense that our engagement with our environment and our ability to experience it is meaningful- it is what learning will ultimately produce. This relates well to the assertion that employees try to understand and make meaning of the cross cultural encounters experienced in the course their working life.

The SLT proposes four elements that constitute learning namely: 1). *Attention* which involves recognition of different behaviors. Bandura (1977) assumes that in order for people to learn, they have to first attend to crucial components of the action, behavior or practice that is being modeled. This may be influenced for instance by the nature of interactions between the individuals 2). *Retention* which involves reflecting upon the recognized or identified behaviors. As a result, people are able to remember the most important aspects from the attention phase to learn. 3). *Reproduction* which involves leaning by practicing or acting upon the learned behavior. He asserts that people through this stage gradually adjust their behavior established on self-correction until an acceptable match is attained. 4). *Incentives*, which connotes the willingness to learn thus making the cycle continuous and interconnected.

Incentives portray that people are likely to adopt a certain action again if it's deemed likely to result into a positive outcome. The diagram below shows these components:

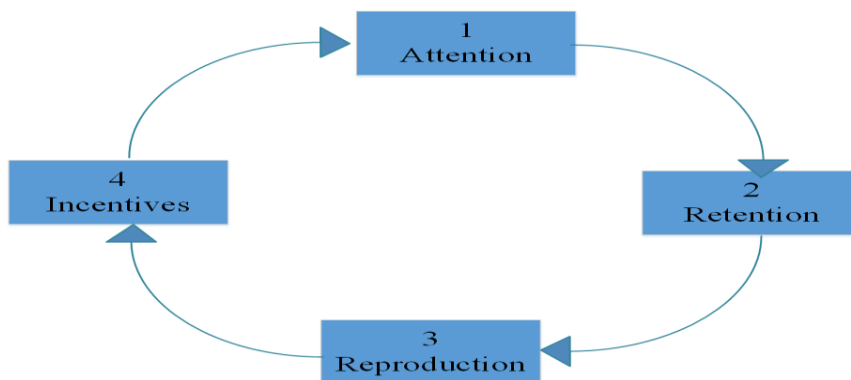


Figure 2: A line drawn structure with elements of the social learning theory

The cross cultural encounters being explored are a social phenomenon which is being conceptualized as contacts, activities and interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. The robust set of the four propositions of the SLT depicts high potential in explaining the development of cross cultural competence owing to the comprehensive nature of this theory in explaining learning and behavior within a social context. It will be beneficial in explaining the potential cultural knowledge and skills that respondents may portray as emanating from their social interactions with fellows of different cultural backgrounds in the context of their working environment.

A blended approach of Kolb's ELT and SLT is significantly ideal for this study because both theories have a focus on learning as a holistic and continuous process which occurs in an environmental context. This kind of learning is central to developing cultural competence because of its conceptualization as skills and knowledge that is learned. In addition, the emphasis that the two perspectives put on context as the environment where learning happens paves way for a better understanding of the cross cultural encounters that happen in the work place. Moreover experience and social interaction which ELT and STL view as sources of learning respectively are integral to the relational nature of cultural encounters that are being

analyzed. Hence, a combination of these two theories yields potential for a comprehensive understanding of CCC development.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes and explains the rationale for the chosen methodology, case selection and details of how the data collection and analysis was done. The data quality concerns and limitations are also described.

4.1 RATIONALE BEHIND CHOSEN METHODOLOGY

A narrative approach was adopted as a way to capture the stories of experiences of cross cultural encounters from the employees' perspective. This approach was adopted due to its fitting nature in informing the ways in which such experiences are understood and constructed as a social reality of the employees who experience them. The narratives would also inspire deeper reflection upon the shared incidents thus providing rich data. Furthermore, qualitative in depth open ended interviews were embraced as a method to receive first-hand information to answer the research questions. Due to the explorative nature of this study, I argue that a combination of these two methods would be ideal in capturing the employees' perspectives on the phenomena in a comprehensive way. According to Catherine (2000), qualitative approach is a tool that is capable of capturing rich data originating from employee's experiences, feelings, thoughts and assumptions. She argues that such an approach offers validity through capturing people's attitudes and views on a specific phenomenon.

4.2 CASE SELECTION

I identified a work place within the public sector that is characterized with a culturally diverse environment and has potential for occurrences of cross cultural encounters. I selected the Swedish Public Employment Service. The institution is big enough with various branch offices spread out in different cities and can be easily reached. This study was carried out in the city of Gothenburg. I negotiated access through e-mail, telephone calls and open visits to the different offices. I contacted the employment managers in the different branch offices to

express my research interest and requested for permission to have access to conduct interviews with willing respondents.

I explained my sample recruitment criterion to the offices contacted; I expressed my interest in interviewing staff who had daily contact with job seekers from different cultural backgrounds. Another key trait was that such staff should have at least 3 years of working experience in the same office. I further highlighted that staff with 5 years or more of work experience would be ideal for my study. I expected this category of employees to have rich experiences from supporting different clients with various cultural backgrounds but also with fellow staff. Since my study was conducted in English, I was keen to recruit respondents who would speak English. However, I was open to interview some respondents who expressed comfort in using Swedish instead. I requested a colleague who was fluent in Swedish to come along during an interview of this kind.

The respondents were recruited from 4 different branch offices, A, B, C and D within Gothenburg. The offices are all within the same agency but there are some differences between them in terms of location as well as the specific functions that some of them handle. For example, Office B and C are located in the central parts of the city but Office B specifically supports refugees who have newly received a permanent residence in Sweden to join the labour market. Office A on the other hand is located in a worse off area while office D is somehow in between. In some ways, the 4 offices tend to see different people thus the employees are likely to have different experiences of cross cultural encounters in these 4 workplaces.

Participants for this study were recruited through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. This method operates like a chain referral and involves observing the initial subject and thereafter asking for assistance from the subject to help identify people with similar traits. I

made contact with willing respondents to set up appointments for interviews. I discussed my recruitment criterion with the initial respondents that I interviewed and requested them to suggest or pass on my recruitment criterion to fellow staff or friends in other branches whom they thought would meet or satisfy the criterion and would be willing to take the interview. I interviewed 13 respondents. I tried to make the sample as representative as possible in terms of gender, nationality and years of work experience at the agency to enrich the data that was collected

Table 1: The sample characteristics are presented below:

Respondent Name (Fictitious)	Nationality	Gender M/F	Employment Office's name (Fictitious)	Total Work Experience (Years)
Respondent R1*	Iran*	F*	Office A*	5*
Respondent R2*	Sweden*	M*	Office B*	3*
Respondent R3*	Sweden*	M*	Office C*	2*
Respondent R4	Sweden	F	Office D	4
Respondent R5	Iran	F	Office C	3
Respondent R6	Egypt	M	Office C	4
Respondent R7	Iran	M	Office B	6
Respondent R8	Ukraine	F	Office D	3
Respondent R9	Sweden	M	Office A	4
Respondent R10	Sweden	F	Office B	19
Respondent R11	Ukraine	F	Office A	6
Respondent R12	Iran	F	Office D	5
Respondent R13	Sweden	M	Office A	4

Source: Author's own. **Note:** The 3 interviews denoted by * were test interviews.

4.3 INTERVIEW GUIDE AND DATA COLLECTION

An interview guide was drafted to facilitate the data collection process. It entailed 3 main sections with questions that would help capture rich data in line with the purpose of the study. These included, demographic or background questions, nature questions and impact questions for both the individual and organizational level. Some of the questions in the guide included; would you describe incidents or examples of experiences where you have interacted with clients or staff from a different background? How would you evaluate the experiences you have described? If good, what was good and why was it a positive experience from your view? What kind of skills did you learn through such experiences? What kind of resources, information or activities do you rely on to work well in such a culturally diverse environment? What are the most important cultural skills that an employee would need to possess to work effectively in such a culturally diverse work place? (See, appendix A). After the first 3 interviews, the interview guide was revised. Redundant questions were deleted and more significant follow up questions that would help dig extra needed data from the respondents were incorporated.

All interviews were arranged in the office premises of the different respondents. They were semi structured with in depth open ended questions aimed at deeply exploring how respondents experienced cross cultural encounters at their work place by narrating examples of critical incidents they experienced with clients and fellow staff and what they perceived as the necessary skills, knowledge and learning methods for becoming culturally competent. According to Kathy (2006) & Della et al (2008), in depth open ended interviews offer a researcher the opportunity to understand the common themes in the phenomenon from the respondent's point of view in order to gain new or unexpected knowledge. All the interviews were recorded for accuracy and to capture the details of the data collected. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was transcribed and the data

collected was simultaneously collated under common themes to come up with codes which provided a basis for analysis and thereafter draw conclusions and recommendations for future research (Charmaz, 2006).

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The thematic content analysis method was used for analyzing the data. According to Ritchie et al (2014), this method focuses on generating categories under which common themes and categories can be collated i.e. the open coding process. The interview transcripts were analyzed, identifying common themes or categories together with gathering examples of those themes from the text. These were in form of quotes from respondents and field notes that were taken during the interviews. The main relevant quotations were tabulated to provide a summary of evolving themes (see, Appendix B). Some respondents were contacted again to clarify some unclear findings and the transcripts were reread to verify and confirm the data. It was a step by step process that went from open coding to collecting important words and phrases relevant to the themes in a common set. Overlapping and similar categories were combined to narrow down to the most relevant categories (ibid). The connections between the categories were described, discussed and results were interpreted in light of the theoretical framework and previous studies on the phenomenon being studied. According to Glaser & Strauss (2006) such a process is systematic but it can be labour intensive and time consuming.

4.5 DATA QUALITY CONCERNS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Silverman (2005), voluntary participation, right to withdrawal, protection of research participants, obtaining informed consent and not doing harm are highlighted as key ethical issues in research. The government institution where interviews for this study were conducted is well known in Sweden. A major concern for this study has been to preserve confidentiality. I took informed consent from all my respondents either through e-mail, telephone conversation or by word of mouth. I sought prior appointments for the interviews

which were conducted and I was flexible to suggested times by the respondents. I described to each of them in detail the purpose of my study and clarified that their participation would be voluntary. I further explained that the data gathered would only be accessed by the researcher and would solely be used for study purposes. Additionally, I emphasized that their names and affiliations would also be concealed to protect their confidentiality.

4.6 LIMITATIONS

Negotiating access was quite challenging. Despite contacting the employment managers of different branch offices, the rate of response from employees who were willing to take the interviews was quite slow and lower than I had anticipated. This was because of the busy schedules of the employment officers. My data collection slacked heavily because of this issue. Furthermore, an unexpected occurrence happened when two of the respondents got sick and their appointments had to be rescheduled after sometime. Language was also a limitation. I missed the opportunity to interview some willing respondents who did not use English. This was due to the fact that my whole study was in English. However, to overcome this challenge, I conducted one interview in both English and Swedish with the help of a colleague who assisted with translation; however, some deep meaning in the data was susceptibly misunderstood or even lost through the process of translation.

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter consists of both the description and analysis of the data collected. The aim of this research was to study and analyze how cross cultural encounters at work enhance employees' cultural learning and competence development at the workplace. In view of this purpose, the broad themes that emerged through the respondents' vivid narratives can be viewed through two different kinds of learning. The first section, *Experiential Learning* will present how interviewees experienced cross cultural encounters as concrete and unique learning experiences that translated into developing cultural competence. The second section, *Social Learning* will describe and analyze how interviewees reported experiencing cross cultural encounters as social interactions through which they developed deeper cultural understanding and knowledge. Quotations are used to support and highlight the relevant aspects in this chapter.

5.1 EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AS LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Primarily, the stories of the interviewees' cross cultural encounters at work revealed the existence of a great cultural diversity in their work environment. While one interviewee, R13 declared the presence of many different cultures at his office, respondent R9 expressed the same aspect by revealing a culturally diverse number of clients on his register whom he was tasked to support:

"...we have many cultures here and majority of my colleagues have different cultural backgrounds ..."

(Respondent R13).

"In my position, I have over 200 job seekers from different cultures that I am supposed to take care of and advise."(Respondent R9)

In addition, the respondents went on to inform that most of the clients they supported had different beliefs about religion, gender, and general views about what was right or wrong. This evidence of cultural diversity enriched the kind of stories and experiences that the interviewees narrated of incidents from their cultural interactions at work. For instance, they shared examples of experiences they found both shocking and interesting. They told stories regarding the varying perspective on aspects like loans, contract and time among other things. The quotes below from Respondent R9, R11 and R5 illustrate this:

Different perspective on loans “...no, “I can’t take a loan,” then we are stuck! As I wondered about why they don’t want to borrow money, I realized that there is a different reason which is a combination of both their cultural and religious belief system. For instance, for most Syrians who are Muslim, they are not allowed to pay interest yet when you take a student loan for example, you have to pay interest.” (Respondent R9)

Religious beliefs “There have been instances where some job seekers from other cultures would come and ask for a prayer room... and then we say, no because we are a government office not a church or mosque...”(Respondent R9)

Different perspective on time “One person came for an appointment 5 hours late, we could not attend to him and he could not understand why we were not attending to him, after all, he was available and even us we were there. It didn’t make sense to him why he was not being attended to yet both parties were present!” (Respondent R11)

Different perspective on contract “...I was extremely surprised by the understanding of the contract, In Sweden a contract between 2 people is a responsibility of each party but in Japan, it’s not like that, when you write a contract, it means you are to continue working together. It’s not necessarily a responsibility of either of the parties. It’s understood to be the beginning of the working together.” (Respondent R5)

It was interesting to discover that such experiences although new and shocking for some respondents, they formed a basis for learning to be culturally competent. I was curious to know further the reason why a respondent like R10 claimed to learn from each cultural experience. The uniqueness of each individual involved in such encounters answered my question:

“I can get tired of doing all the other things but not interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds... I am considering working for an extra year. Every person you meet is a new school and experience to learn.”(Respondent R10)

This perception of each cultural encounter as a new school and learning experience points to Kolb’s (1984) view of learning as a continuous process grounded in experience where relearning and integrating old and new ideas from each cultural encounter are crucial aspects of cultural competence development. Hence this respondent was implying that being culturally competent is a process that involves being open to learn from every cultural encounter

Correspondingly, prior cross cultural experiences were reported to complement the way individuals approach subsequent cultural situations. They provide the experience and learning that may be needed to thrive well in culturally diverse work environments. Respondent R9 recounts previous cross cultural experience as the foundation she needed to develop her competence to work effectively in her job. She recalls:

“Before I joined working here, I worked as a teacher in a multicultural area. So I had experience meeting and having to work so closely with individuals from different cultures and this is now important for my work in this office.” (Respondent R9)

I think that this quote signifies the role of previous cross cultural experiences in making individuals culturally competent in the work place in two ways. First, they provide exposure to different cultural perspectives. Respondent R9 points out the multicultural environment in which he worked. Second, they provide a platform for a holistic adaptation amidst similar or new cultural experiences. He acknowledges the influence of his previous cultural experience in his present work even if it's in a different work environment.

Kolb's ELT views experience as a source of learning and development. One of the longest serving respondents attests to this when she explains that the many years she spent working in a culturally diverse environment invariably developed her cultural competence:

“So having the ability to work and serve people from different cultural backgrounds for 19 years now is not something that I have learned at once. It's been a whole lot of experience and a combination of many things in my work life and part of my personal life.” (Respondent R10)

This respondent is attributing her cultural knowledge and understanding to the series of cultural experiences that she encountered in her work and personal life over a long period of time. Moreover, she further disclosed that she had a cross cultural marriage which points to the cultural learning that can happen through cultural encounters in one's personal life:

“Growing up I also had some huge interest in what was happening in the world. I got a huge interest for example for Africa. I married a man from Ivory Coast. The cultures were quite different but it was exciting. So for me this experience also helped me quite a lot.”(Respondent R10)

Additionally, one interviewee took another twist in explaining his cultural experiences. He depicted that the daily cultural situations at his work place are what enhanced his cultural learning. He called it “learning by doing”. I imagine that by this phrase, this respondent was implying Kolb's view of learning as involving the integrated participation of the whole

individual – thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving as well as interaction with one’s environment:

“The most important element is learning by doing. I do something and then understand how it works.

And know if it works or does not for me the next time...” (Respondent R14)

“It’s a package of learning from experience...so it’s like a cycle of experiencing, doing it and learning it.”(Respondent R5)

Along similar lines, another respondent discounted training in favor of his argument for experience as the ideal way for developing cultural competence asserting that cultural experiences enrich their cultural knowledge more than formal training. This is confirmed by the following quote:

“It is the real experiences that count in these cultural aspects. If they try to educate us, we would say,

“No, that’s not how we do it” (Respondent R5)

According to Kolb’s (1984) ELT, in order to develop competence of any kind, an individual undergoes an integrated learning process. He prescribed a four stage learning cycle of *concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization* and *active experimentation*. The findings portrayed the respondents to be undergoing cultural learning through these four stages. For instance, one respondent shared a *concrete experience* he encountered saying:

“I once asked an Iranian about their mental health and the person perceived it to be like I was

thinking he is mad or insane...” (Respondent R7)

Upon reviewing and reflecting on such an experience i.e. *reflective observation*, this interviewee identified an inconsistency between this cultural experience and the understanding he had prior. He had no idea that his question would be perceived differently

by the other party. This reflection formed a basis for learning through this experience. It gave rise to a new idea and modification of the existing understanding that had just been challenged i.e. *Abstract Conceptualization*. This respondent goes on to affirm this stage of learning:

“...so it may be right to ask all the other questions about health but not one involving mental health. I have to phrase it differently.”(Respondent 7)

By this suggestion, respondent R7 was further trying out what he had learned. After realizing that asking about mental health directly would be perceived to be rude, he learned that identifying other ways of seeking the same information would be ideal, for instance, phrasing the question differently. Such an example of how to take action about what had been learned opens broader avenues for continuous learning when the respondent is presented with similar or probably different situations in future. This confirms Kolb's idea of *active experimentation* for which he argues that it opens up more opportunities for learning and developing competence.

Respondent R4 shares an incident that clearly summarizes and depicts Kolb's experiential learning cycle. She reported that through reflecting upon her cultural experience, she came to understand the significance of language in building trust and interest. Upon having this knowledge, she was prompted to actively experiment it in other cultural encounters. She reported a positive result:

“Through experience, I have come to learn that the new way to capture trust and interest is the language. If I tell them 2 words in their language like hi or bye. I have tried it and you see that they trust more and are happy to talk to you and become more curious. So it breaks the barriers and people come to trust more. It's kind of a tricky for me.” (Respondent R4).

Although a positive result was yielded from respondent R4's scenario, there is a possibility that the opposite could be encountered in another experience considering the complexity and

uniqueness of each cross cultural encounter as portrayed earlier by respondent R10. I deem that Kolb's view of learning as a holistic process of adaptation to one's environment is most relevant at the *active experimentation* stage. Despite the cultural knowledge that one's experiences might have built, a positive outcome may only be probable when it's adapted well to each situation.

Going by the respondents' statements above, I think it is clear that their varied experiences of cross cultural encounters at work and previous cultural experiences, provided learning opportunities for developing their cultural competence. Moreover, the emphasis on the fact that it's an ongoing process through which they "learn by doing" refined the respondents' sensitivity to the individual and group dynamics that are commonly involved in cultural encounters in addition to the adaptability which is essential for each unique cultural encounter. The following quote summarizes this key element in developing cultural competence:

"You see I have been working with this and in this situation for some years and am quite used to it. But even after these years, it's getting more and more difficult to see any patterns...when it comes to cultural interaction; you always have to stand on 2 legs. 1. You have the cultural influences on a person and 2. You have the individual who is totally different. So it's always a kind of balance between the group phenomenon and the individual who is always unique..." (Respondent R9)

I think this respondent echoed the perspectives of other participants who recognized their cross cultural encounters as learning experiences through which they gained cultural knowledge to be able to work effectively in their roles. Moreover, I believe that he was keen enough to identify and summarize the dynamics in cross cultural encounters from his perspective and also prescribe a crucial response stated in the quote above.

5.2 SOCIAL LEARNING

CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AS SOCIAL LEARNING INTERACTIONS

This theme points to how interviewees experienced cross cultural encounters as social learning interactions. It further reveals the initiatives they took to develop their cultural competence highlighting what they perceived to be the most important aspects in that process.

The primary focus of Bandura's (1977) SLT rests on the fact that learning and development of competence does not rest with an individual but rather in a social context from interacting with different individuals or observing other people's behavior. In line with this assumption, some respondents identified and emphasized the fact that people are social beings who mostly learn from others. They reported that this common human nature propels people to want to interact with others and in the process, they learn from each other. Respondent R8 expressed that:

“It's human nature, because people aren't that different. Culture is mainly a surface sometimes. And if you scrip off that cultural surface, people are the same. They are social beings. So we learn most through interaction with others.” (Respondent R 8)

In addition, another respondent disclosed that interaction with his colleagues at work was the best way he developed his ability to work effectively with the various cultures. She refers to such cultural interactions as more effective than for example a cultural training course. Moreover, she pinpoints listening as a key trait to possess in such interactions:

“Conversations with my colleagues are the best tool. They understand me better instead of a book or a course. I think openly interacting with people is more effective, meeting, listening, believing in others is key to learning cultural competence.” (Respondent R4)

Comparable to respondent R8, I assume that R4 was maintaining Bandura's (1977) proposition that individuals learn from their environment either from interacting with different

individuals or observing other people's behavior. In this case, this respondent referred to her colleagues at work. However, she seemed to denote some focus on the elements that make learning from the cultural interactions possible.

By the same token, although social cultural interactions were identified as key to developing cultural competence, this benefit cannot be realized amidst passivity of the parties involved. The empirical findings noted the significance of mutual effort, trust and interest needed to enhance the cultural learning that can happen through the cross cultural encounters at the work place. According to respondent R10, both parties involved should portray the willingness to learn from each other:

“...it must be the effort of two parties involved. They must all show interest in the other and that they trust each other and are willing to learn. We all need to take the effort to see success in the intercultural relations.” (Respondent R10)

I consider that respondent R10 was referring to the interpersonal nature of cross cultural encounters and the active social participation that each party must portray in order to learn from each other. According to the SLT, knowing and developing one's competence is a matter of participating in active engagement with the environment through which this competence is developed. Hence by identifying mutual effort as a prerequisite for gaining cultural knowledge from cultural encounters, this respondent was reflecting Bandura's assumption.

Besides, mutual effort should involve beneficial steps towards building the knowledge and skill being sought. The respondents revealed taking extra personal initiatives to grow their cultural knowledge at work. For example they described the use of the internet, seminars and social interaction with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds as their main source of

cultural information and learning. The following quotes from respondent R7 and R9 confirm this:

“I take my own initiative and check information through the internet about the culture of the person I am to meet the next day or week. So through this way, I equip myself to learn something about the other culture.” (Respondent R9)

“I go to many seminars about cultures... I have friends from different cultures and colleagues so we try to help each other too.” (Respondent R7)

The declarations made by these two respondents imply the significance of personal development and the initiatives that employees in any setting should take to grow their knowledge and skills. Moreover, it could also mean that developing cultural competence is a skill that requires individual effort as much as other resources may be available.

Identical to Kolb (1984), Bandura (1977) suggests four main component processes that guide social learning namely, *attention, retention, reproduction* and *incentives*. When the respondents claimed to go out of their way to meet and engage in conversations with clients from different cultural backgrounds and listen to them, it portrays that there making the effort to show interest and take the initiative i.e. *attention* which opens away for them to identify the important aspects of another culture. A case in point is respondent R10's experience;

“Most women that I have met from Somalia or the Middle East are treated as if there not worth in their culture. I see that when they come to my office for example... Of course not all of them but many of them are quite shy. They will take a while to answer the question of what do you want to do? They are shy in the beginning; they will not answer it straight forward like it is in this culture. So I have to keep making effort, make them feel that it's safe to say their opinion” (Respondent R10)

Through asking questions, reading about the different cultures on the internet, attending seminars and inquiring from colleagues, the respondents are engaging in pondering on certain

virtues or probable meaning of certain recognized behavior they identified in their cultural encounters. According to Bandura (1977), such steps point to the *retention* stage in the social learning cycle where an individual tries to gain meaning of certain observed behavior in a social interaction. I still found an example of this stage to be explicitly implied from R10's story, she continued:

"When I say to them that they have to earn their own money, they look at me like, what do you mean? So they usually ask me why they need to work and earn money. I have come to understand that these women had a father who provided for them and then they married and the husband provided for them. So I understood that this work situation is new for them." (Respondent R10)

Additionally, the respondents' acknowledgement that their learning happened through practicing – acting upon learned aspects, which some termed as “leaning by doing”, they are clearly engaging in the *reproduction* learning stage which may inform the way they perceive future cultural encounters. For example respondent R4 above referred to the use of language as a trick that helps him to gain interest and trust because he discovered that it achieves that goal from previous cultural encounters. Such learning which creates a further willingness to learn is what Bandura calls the *incentives* that make the learning cycle continuous.

The respondents echoed special emphasis on the case that one has to be the right person with the right qualities. They listed traits like cultural self-awareness, open-mindedness, adaptability; positive attitude and sacrificial spirit to be the essential traits that an individual should possess for learning and developing cultural competence. Respondent R10 and R12 expressed this aspect:

"... You have to be that kind of person. More like have a personality that is needed to work there. So if you're conservative and inflexible and authoritative, you won't like working here... I don't think it's something you can learn. You either that kind of person or you are not." (Respondent R10)

“There is a certain type of people who get attracted to working in such areas and stay. It has something to do with attitude and sacrifice too.” (Respondent R12)

Parallel to the above perspective, Respondent R8 emphasizes passion and commitment in understanding the various cultural perspectives that one will encounter especially in culturally diverse work environments but still the emphasis is on being the person with the desired traits. The following quote clearly illustrates her assertion:

“You need passion and commitment...but you have to be the right person and you have to be made of the right stuff. Working with different cultures can be stressful, you meet a lot of people all the time, and there is a lot of work to do in understanding their perspective” (Respondent R8)

In view of the respondents’ experiences of cultural learning through the experiences described and analyzed above, It could be deduced that although the respondents reported, cultural interactions to be avenues through which they grew their cultural competence, they also had a special focus on the traits that one must possess to wholesomely benefit from the cultural knowledge and learning that can be attained. This is an aspect that emerged as contrasting from the theoretical framework which. Kolb (1987) and Bandura (1977) have a huge focus on the different processes or stages of learning that an individual undergoes to develop competence within a particular context with limited focus on individual qualities of the parties involved in the learning processes. Perspectives of previous researchers will be integrated to further understand the findings in the following chapter.

6 DISCUSSION

The ways in which cross cultural encounters at work enhance employees' cultural learning and cultural competence emerged in the form of two themes of experiential learning and social learning as explained in the previous section. For the discussion, this chapter will focus on the two different ways of developing cultural competence that were identified based on the perspectives of the respondents described in the findings.

6.1 DEVELOPING CROSS CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

It could be deduced from the empirical findings that the respondents have been exposed to unique experiences through interaction with other cultures at the work place. According to Montuori et al (2004), cross cultural encounters are potentially creative in developing CCC given the broad spectrum of the unique experiences that they offer different individuals. By narrating stories about incidents where they encountered a different cultural perspective on various aspects for instance time, contract, and acceptable behavior in public; gender and different religious beliefs in their work place, the participants reflected upon how such experiences had developed their cultural understanding and knowledge. This explains why some respondents used statements like; each cultural experience is a "new school" or "new learning experience." As such experiences reoccur in their daily working lives; they become avenues for cultural learning and competence development.

Correspondingly, the respondents expressed that prior cross cultural experience was extremely helpful and formed a basis for learning to be culturally competent amidst new cultural situations. This emphasis on prior cross cultural experience suggests that interviewees with such experiences are likely to thrive well and grow further because of the earlier cultural exposure that they carry. This potentially fits with Kosmitzki's (1996) assertion that people

who have worked in cross cultural work environments are reported to have reaffirmed their identity more closely and find it easier to work in such environments in future.

Besides, Kaufmann et al (2014) uphold that developing and acquiring CCC is a much more complicated and long term process that takes time and experience. They argue that individuals undergo a series of cultural learning experiences. A case in point from the analysis is of respondent R10 who explained her cultural competence development to have been shaped through her 19 years of work experience in a culturally diverse workplace. In light of this example, there seems to be a focus on cross cultural competence as a skill that is learnt through experience rather than a focus on it as an innate human characteristic. The analysis of the findings shows that employees found cultural encounters and prior cross cultural experience to be crucial for their work instead of planned training. This implies that cross cultural experiences have the potential to trigger cultural learning which culminates into greater cultural knowledge. This is most likely the argument for the limited formalized cultural training which the respondents reported.

Despite the cultural learning that participants portrayed to emanate from their cross cultural encounters at work, some researchers reveal that potential misunderstandings could also occur between the parties involved. For instance, Ramburuth & Welch (2005) and Som (2009) argue that cultural conflicts, damaged relationships, failed projects and loss of organizational talent arise when employees lack cultural competence to work effectively in culturally diverse work environments. Rice (2007) on the other hand warned that if the public sector ignores cultural knowledge and understanding of the groups they serve in society, individuals may miss out on getting the services or support that best suits them or better still, they may receive services that are perhaps more inappropriate than helpful.

Moreover, if devotion to cultural knowledge is ignored, the same rich learning cultural experiences can act as barriers to the effective accomplishment of main work goals. Even if the interviewees' cultural encounters enriched their cultural competence, they acknowledged the challenging and complex nature of such experiences. No wonder, attention has been called to the possible difficulties and frustration that occur to the workers when they are confronted with two different cultural backgrounds (Chang, 2007). I argue that these could be the perspectives that participants were pointing at when they reported that one has to have a strong passion and commitment to work in a culturally diverse environment. They further asserted that one has to be adaptable because culturally diverse work places can be stressful (Respondent R10 and R8). This implies that developing cultural competence calls for keen interest, intentionality and resilience about learning through the various cultural experiences that employees encounter in their working life.

6.2 DEVELOPING CROSS CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Several studies have echoed the fact that increased internationalization of the labour market has led to greater depth of interaction between employees, clients and managers of different cultures (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Lynch et al, 2004; Lenartowicz et al., 2014). The empirical findings portray this to be true given the cultural diversity that is reported to exist among both staff as well as clients. Although such cultural interactions are perceived to be enriching learning experiences, studies have found that cross cultural encounters are not always successful and thus should be a subject of attention to enable employees and managers to determine the balance needed to better maximise on the potential cultural competence that can be developed through them (Stening,1979).

Respondents argue that openly interacting with people is a better tool for learning about other cultures. This confirms the fact that earlier attempts at framing the development of CCC focused very much on social interactions between sojourners and other members of the receiving society or the cultural context in which they operated (Wilson et al., 2013). Moreover, Ghosh (2013) argues that until cross cultural encounters take place and potential conflicts, assumptions and values are made visible, then shall the deep seated stereotypic representations of other cultural groups be challenged.

The participants in the study reported mutual effort, trust and interest as fundamental aspects for cultural interactions that they find themselves in at the work place. I posit that the respondents were trying to imply that the functionality of cultural interactions rests with the parties involved. They should be willing to learn by practicing and stepping out of their comfort zone to show attention and interest in understanding a different cultural perspective. This stands out as it provides a foundation for more learning opportunities which are essential for stimulating cultural learning which in turn develops CCC. According to Bruno (1996), the

quality of interpersonal cross cultural interaction is found to be a function of the participants' ability to understand of each other's cultural perspective and the underlying assumptions there in. This gives insight into why researchers like Ong & Ward (2005), argue that the greater the cultural encounters, the greater the opportunities of cultural learning and thus knowledge and skill development. Moreover, some scholars still conclude that long term cross cultural interactions among employees facilitate the highest learning potential for CCC, under the assertion that participants will be in position to handle cultural differences as a resource for learning and designing effective actions according to the context in which they operate (Bartel- Radic, 2006; Ashdown, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2012). Based on the analysis, I deem that work related cultural interactions are crucial influencers towards making individuals culturally competent at the work place.

By stating some personality traits like adaptability, open-mindedness, cultural self-awareness, willingness to learn, passion, commitment, sacrifice among others, the interviewees seem to have been pointing to two important aspects in cultural competence development. First, the relational nature of the context through which this competence is reinforced - the fact that individuals are main actors in potential cultural interactions. Second, that one has to be the right person with the right qualities and attitudes in order to develop this needed competence. It's not surprising therefore that the participants revealed that there is a particular category of people who get attracted to working in diverse work places and they love it. I think they were referring to individuals who possess or are willing to obtain such traits.

In supporting a similar thought, some researchers have argued that attaining cultural competence requires a flexible mind, an open heart and a willingness to welcome alternative perspectives with an awareness of its deliberate influence on one's thoughts and behavior (Johnson et al., 2006). Inferring from what the respondents in the analysis reported, I argue that another crucial facet in developing cultural competence is that one has to possess the

desire for stepping beyond one's comfort zones of values and beliefs to use their cultural knowledge and awareness to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. This further explains the emphasis which respondents like R8 and R12 put on some attributes like passion and commitment as well as sacrifice as necessary to possess in order to develop one's cultural knowledge.

According to Ghosh (2013), a culturally competent person is expected to possess strong personal identity, knowledge as well as show sensitivity and compatibility with the beliefs and values of other cultures. Several respondents affirmed that the qualities of an individual are a central part in the effective development of CCC. This aspect could also be the reason why self-initiative is a serious expectation when it comes to cultural learning. For instance, some participants in the study discredited formal cultural training in preference for real cultural interactions and experiences as a better tool. Although they did not view cultural training as heavily important, some researchers like Earley (1987) argue that intercultural cultural training exercises are in themselves avenues for cultural interaction for individuals and a practical approach towards reducing cultural shocks.

In light of the above perspective, another possible assumption would be that the development of CCC is more of a matter of choice on the side of the individual or the organization. The respondents affirm that they take their own initiative to develop their cultural knowledge. According Mitchell (2007), developing CCC is a cultural learning and development process that requires frequent learning, relearning and unlearning about different cultural groups. The findings of this study confirm this assertion and suggest that participants were continually involved in information gathering about other cultures and processing. For example, they expressed initiatives taken to attend cultural seminars, search cultural information through the internet and intentionally asking questions to fellow staff from other cultures with the goal of gaining cultural knowledge needed in their work. Such initiatives concur with Shaw's (1990)

assertion that individuals often pursue as much information as they can find about culturally diverse individuals or cultural experiences in order to reinforce their different awareness of individuals from their cultural perspective or that of other groups. In view of the above arguments, it is evident that cross cultural encounters at work are pivotal in making individuals culturally competent.

7 CONCLUSION

Through this research, I was curious to study how cross cultural encounters at work may enhance the employees' cultural learning and eventually develop their cultural competence at the work place. This chapter offers a summary of the ways in which this purpose was achieved based on the central perspectives revealed by the respondents about the subject. In addition, the implication of this research to the industry, individuals and future researchers will be outlined.

The participants of this study revealed vivid experiences of their cross cultural encounters at the work. Although several of these encounters captured points of cultural differences of the parties involved, majority of the narratives told revolved around work related issues for instance the varying understanding of employment contract, loans, time as well as general way of doing things. This could be justified by the role of the public agency where the interviews were conducted. Since it's mandated to professionally link job seekers to employers on the labour market, it needs not to be very surprising that resulting cultural stories were centered on work and jobs.

Based on the analysis of the empirical findings, I conclude that work related cross cultural encounters are well suited to offer opportunities of cultural learning and competence development. The cultural learning processes happen in two ways. First, cultural encounters form concrete experiences and challenging cultural situations that present possibilities for experiential learning. Moreover, the cultural experiences may be previously created in one's life or they may be freshly created in the daily working life of an individual. Second, in consideration of cross cultural encounters as a form of social phenomena in which individuals are central actors, there interpersonal nature eases social learning. The participants confirmed developing their cultural knowledge from open interaction with colleagues and clients from

various cultural backgrounds. Despite confining my study to work related cross cultural encounters, I found out that those cultural encounters in the personal lives or non-work setting of the respondents also contributed to their cultural competence at work. This was packaged in the form of previous cross cultural experiences which some participants reported.

I found it striking that the participants had a special focus on the individual. They revealed personality traits which are essential for thriving through cross cultural encounters and learning through them. This is an aspect that emerged as significant from the participants' perspective but was not implied thoroughly by the theoretical framework. It was interesting to see the importance that participants attached to traits like adaptability, open-mindedness, cultural self-awareness, trust, curiosity, passion, commitment among others. Therefore, besides the learning process, the personality traits of the individual actors in the process are equally crucial to consider.

It is interesting in my study that the two themes, looked to overlap and complement each other. In a way this reflected the theoretical framework upon which this study was analyzed but I also realize that it rests on the dynamic nature of the cross cultural encounters that were being explored. They could be understood as experiences as well as interpersonal cultural contacts. I think that a crucial contribution of this study towards knowledge about cultural competence development is that I adopted the views of individual employees as a whole about their cultural experiences in order broaden the perspective of the potential cultural learning that can be built through them. But I realize that I cannot put forward definite conclusions regarding how cross cultural competence is developed beyond the scope of the employees' narratives of cross cultural encounters at work analyzed above. It is a limitation that the stories told were one sided and narrated from a single individual's perspective. However, the findings yielded understanding into the fundamental importance of cross cultural encounters at work and how they enhance cultural learning and competence which cannot be overlooked.

7.1 IMPLICATIONS TOWARDS INDUSTRY AND INDIVIDUALS

In today's globalized business environment, the notion of developing employees' cultural competence continues to be extremely interesting for companies, HR practitioners as well as employees. This signifies the need for increasing reciprocal understanding and collaboration across differences and echoes a serious call for HR to engage in training and development of employees in various competences. This implies that practitioners involved in organizational development activities especially in the public sector should be acquainted with the employee perception of their development initiatives as regards to key competences for enhancing the smooth delivery of the sector services and other operations for instance cross cultural competence.

According to Rice (2010), efforts made to develop cultural competence address the ability of a public agency to support and provide culturally appropriate and responsive programs and services. For instance, although the respondents reported that experiential and social learning are ideal for developing CCC, they didn't disregard the need for a well-designed training or programs that can equip them to serve the culturally diverse groups of people that can best utilize the services they offer. This suggests that an integrated approach that involves both social and cognitive aspects of cultural learning could be equitably essential. However, it should be tailored to suit and address contextual needs for it to be relevant and yield results.

Since developing CCC is not static but necessitates frequent learning, relearning and unlearning about different cultural groups (Mitchell, 2007). Employees should be vigilant in growing in this area. The analysis portrayed the individual as central and in charge of most of their cultural learning. Moreover, he or she should develop all the necessary skills and knowledge that they may need to work in culturally diverse work places. I posit that employees, both domestic staff and international assignees would benefit from looking deeper

and reflecting on the cross cultural encounters that they experience in their working life as they have potential for inspiring cultural learning. The practice of cultural competence stresses the ability to work effectively in different cultural contexts. Employees in this era need to take effort to develop themselves into that right people by gaining cross cultural experience through intentional social interaction with other cultures to be prepared better prepared to do their jobs.

7.2 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although there may be no single theory that solely provides a complete explanation of individual learning and development of various competences, this study suggested a combination of the Social Learning Theory and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory to be useful as one lens through which to view the development of CCC. However, because of the comprehensive nature of cultural competence, some aspects specifically personality traits which the two theories didn't directly address emerged from the interviewees' perspective of the phenomenon. For future researchers, an integration of a theoretical perspective that captures personal attributes or traits would be worthwhile to explore. In addition, the concept under study was mainly explored from the employees' perspective in the public sector. I think an exploration of the concept from an organizational perspective would be enriching especially in other sectors for example higher education institutions or domestic business organizations. Moreover, this study had a specific focus on the work related cross cultural encounters with limited devotion on cultural experiences in non-work settings which individuals may encounter. It would be interesting to explore how such experiences may impact cultural competence in the work place.

8 REFERENCES

- Adler, N. J. (1983). Cross-Cultural Management Research: The Ostrich and the Trend. *The Academy of Management Review*, 8(2), 226–232.
- Atkinson, G., Jr., & Murrell, P. H. (1988). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory: A Meta-Model for Career Exploration. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 66(8), 374- 385.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Social Cognitive Theory in Cultural Context. *Applied Psychology An International Review*, 51(2), 269 – 290.
- Bean, R. (2006). Cross-Cultural Competence and Training in Australia. *Diversity Factor*, 14(1), 14–22.
- Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 179–196.
- Black, J. S., & Mendenhall, M. (1990). Cross-Cultural Training Effectiveness: A Review and a Theoretical Framework for Future Research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 15(1), 113–136.
- Campinha-Bacote, J. (2002). The Process of Cultural Competence in the Delivery of Healthcare Services: A Model of Care. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 13(3), 181–184.
- Chang, W.-W. (2007). The negative can be positive for cultural competence. *Human Resource Development International*, 10(2), 225–231.
- Chang, W.-W. (2009). Schema adjustment in cross-cultural encounters: A study of expatriate international aid service workers. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(1), 57–68.

- Charmaz, Kathy (2006) Constructing grounded theory. *A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Chiu, C.-Y., Lonner, W. J., Matsumoto, D., & Ward, C. (2013). Cross-Cultural Competence Theory, Research, and Application. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(6), 843–848.
- Della Porta, Donatella and Michael Keating (2008). *How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction*.
- Dollwet, M., & Reichard, R. (2014). Assessing cross-cultural skills: validation of a new measure of cross-cultural psychological capital. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(12), 1669–1696.
- Earley, P. C. (1987). Intercultural Training for Managers: A Comparison of Documentary and Interpersonal Methods. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 30(4), 685–698.
- Earley, P. C., & Peterson, R. S. (2004). The Elusive Cultural Chameleon: Cultural Intelligence as a New Approach to Intercultural Training for the Global Manager. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 3(1), 100–115.
- Eurostat (2015), *Public Employment Sweden* http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Public_employment_-_Sweden
- Ferraro, Gary P, and Elizabeth Kathleen Briody (2013). *The Cultural Dimension Of Global Business*. Boston: Pearson
- Fish, A., & Wood, J. (1997). Cross-cultural Management Competence in Australian Business Enterprises. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 35(1), 37–52.

- Gertsen, M. C., & Sørderberg, A.-M. (2010). Expatriate stories about cultural encounters—A narrative approach to cultural learning processes in multinational companies. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 26(3), 248–257.
- Gibson, S. K. (2004). Social Learning (Cognitive) Theory and Implications for Human Resource Development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 6(2), 193–210.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2006). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, N.J: Aldine Transaction (a division of Transaction Publishers).
- Hakim Catherine (2000) Research Design. *Successful designs for social and economic research*. *Routledge Management*, 26(10), 1335–1359.
- Hammer, M. R., Gudykunst, W. B., & Wiseman, R. L. (1978). Dimensions of intercultural effectiveness: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2(4), 382–393.
- Harzing, Anne-Wil, and Ashly Pinnington (2011). *International Human Resource Management*. London: SAGE
- Haslberger, A. (2013). Does cross-cultural adjustment coincide with career capital growth? Evidence from Vienna, Austria. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(4), 791–805.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, J. P., Lenartowicz, T., & Apud, S. (2006). Cross-Cultural Competence in International Business: Toward a Definition and a Model. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 37(4), 525–543.

- Johnson, R. G., & Borrego, E. (2009). Public Administration and the Increased Need for Cultural Competencies in the Twenty-First Century. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 31(2), 206–221.
- Kaufmann, H. R., Englezou, M., & García-Gallego, A. (2014). Tailoring Cross-Cultural Competence Training. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 56(1), 27–42.
- Kosmitzki, C. (1996). The Reaffirmation of Cultural Identity in Cross-Cultural Encounters. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22(3), 238–248.
- Kyeyune, C. (2012). *Towards the development of a cultural competence framework for human resource development professionals in international business: A study of Best Practice Learning and Diversity companies* (Ph.D.). Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, United States -- Illinois.
- Landis, D., & Bhagat, R. S. (Eds.). (1996). *Handbook of intercultural training* (2. ed). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Lenartowicz, T., Johnson, J. P., & Konopaske, R. (2014). The application of learning theories to improve cross-cultural training programs in MNCs. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(12), 1697–1719.
- Lynch, E. W., & Hanson, M. J. (2004). *Developing cross-cultural competence: a guide for working with children and their families* (3. Ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- McPhatter AR. (1997). Cultural competence in child welfare: what is it? How do we achieve it? What happens without it? *Child Welfare*, 76(1), 255–278 24p.
- Mitchell F. Rice. (2007). A post-modern cultural competency framework for public administration and public service delivery. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 20(7), 622–637.

- Montagliani, A., & Giacalone, R. A. (1998). Impression Management and Cross-Cultural Adaption. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 138*(5), 598–608.
- Montuori, A., & Fahim, U. (2004). Cross-Cultural Encounter as an Opportunity for Personal Growth. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 44*(2), 243–265.
- Ong, A. S. J., & Ward, C. (2005). The Construction and Validation of a Social Support Measure for Sojourners The Index of Sojourner Social Support (ISSS) Scale. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 36*(6), 637–661.
- Primecz, Henriett, Laurence Romani, and Sonja Sackmann (2011). *Cross-Cultural Management in Practice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011.
- Public Employment Service Annual Report (2011)
<http://www.arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.4ab2e7121379d5897aa80006770/arsredovisning+2011+engelska.pdf>
- Ramburuth, P., & Welch, C. (2005). Educating the Global Manager. *Journal of Teaching in International Business, 16*(3), 5–27.
- Ravasi, C., Salamin, X., & Davoine, E. (2015). Cross-cultural adjustment of skilled migrants in a multicultural and multilingual environment: an explorative study of foreign employees and their spouses in the Swiss context. *The International Journal of Human Resource*
- Rice, M. F. (2010). *Diversity and Public Administration: Theory, Issues, and Perspectives*. M.E. Sharpe.
- Rikard Althin & Lars Behrenz. (2005). Efficiency and productivity of employment offices: evidence from Sweden. *International Journal of Manpower, 26*(2), 196–206.

- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Mc Naughton Nicholls, C., & Ormston, R. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers* (2. ed.). Los Angeles, California: SAGE.
- Shaw, J. B. (1990). A Cognitive Categorization Model for the Study of Intercultural Management. *The Academy of Management Review*, 15(4), 626–645.
- Shenkar, O. (2001). Cultural Distance Revisited: Towards a More Rigorous Conceptualization and Measurement of Cultural Differences. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 32(3), 519–535.
- Sieck, W. R., Smith, J. L., & Rasmussen, L. J. (2013). Metacognitive Strategies for Making Sense of Cross-Cultural Encounters. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(6), 1007–1023.
- Silverman, David (2005). *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sims, R. R. (1983). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory: A Framework for Assessing Person-Job Interaction. *The Academy of Management Review*, 8(3), 501–508.
- Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM 2008): *Selected Cultural Factors in Human Resource Management*.
- Søderberg, A.-M., & Holden, N. (2002). Rethinking Cross Cultural Management in a Globalizing Business World. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 2(1), 103–121.
- Som, A. (2009). *International Management* (1st edition): Managing the global corporation. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Steve Sizoo, Richard Plank, Wilfried Iskat, & Hendrick Serrie. (2005). The effect of intercultural sensitivity on employee performance in cross-cultural service encounters. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 19(4), 245–255.

- Sverige & Sverige (Eds.). (1973). *The public employment service in Sweden*. Stockholm: Statensinvandrarverk.
- Taylor, E. W. (1994). Intercultural Competency: A Transformative Learning Process. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 44(3), 154–174.
- Trompenaars, Fons, and Charles Hampden-Turner (2012). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business 3/E*. McGraw-Hill Companies
- Tung, R. L. (1987). Expatriate Assignments: Enhancing Success and Minimizing Failure. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 1(2), 117–125.
- Wang, D., Feng, T., Freeman, S., Fan, D., & Zhu, C. J. (2014). Unpacking the “skill – cross-cultural competence” mechanisms: Empirical evidence from Chinese expatriate managers. *International Business Review*, 23(3), 530–541.
- White, R. P., & Shullman, S. L. (2012). Thirty years of global leadership training: A cross-cultural odyssey. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 64(4), 268–278.
<http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1037/a0031654>
- Witte, E. E. (1936). INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS COUNSELORS, INC. “Administration of Public Employment Offices and Unemployment Insurance: Canada, France, Sweden, Switzerland” (Book Review). *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 31(193), 452.
- Wood, E. D., & Peters, H. Y. Z. S. (2014). Short-term cross-cultural study tours: impact on cultural intelligence. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(4), 558–570.
- Wu, W.-Y., & Bodigerel-Koehler, M. (2013). The mediating effects of cross-cultural dynamic competencies on the relationship between multicultural personality and cross-cultural adjustment. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(21), 4026–4045.

Wurtz, O. (2014). An empirical investigation of the effectiveness of pre-departure and in-country cross-cultural training. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(14), 2088–2101.

9 APPENDIX

9.1 APPENDIX A- INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE: Cross Cultural Encounters & Learning

INTRODUCTION: Opening remarks

DEMOGRAPHIC & BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

I am going to begin with some basic questions about your background:

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you worked for this organization?
3. What is your current position? Would you give a brief overview of what you do in your work?
4. What attracted you to the work you're doing in this organization?
5. What are the goals you most want to accomplish in your work?

NATURE OF CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS QUESTIONS

1. Would you describe incidents or examples of experiences from working and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds in your work?
2. What kind of resources or information do you use to equip you to work with the experiences you have told?

PERSONAL IMPACT QUESTIONS

1. Would you view the interactions you described as learning experiences? Please list examples of the specific skills you have learned through those encounters? (What did you learn?)
2. In your opinion, what kind of skills should employees possess to effectively operate in a culturally diverse work environment?
3. Is there some kind of training that you receive from your organization to develop the skills

necessary to effectively work in such a culturally diverse work place? Please describe what this kind of training looks like? What are the main elements of this training?

4. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the training you have described in equipping you to work effectively in your work?
5. What should be the main components of this kind of training?

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything that you think your organization should do to develop your ability to work effectively in such a culturally diverse environment?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. I have finished with the questions I intended to pose. Is there anything you feel I should have asked? Is there anything you would like to add to what we have shared?
2. Would it be possible to contact you with further follow up questions if need be?

Finally

Thank the interviewee for their time and cooperation.

9.2 APPENDIX B- DATA CODING PROCESS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Code Book 1: Summary of categories and themes from the Interview Transcripts Analysis

Evidence of various cultural backgrounds & cross cultural encounters at work

Examples: *"I encountered a person whom I asked, what do you want to do in Sweden? And he said, I want to make money and not belong to social service. And I said, well, I have a company that you can work at and earn money. And he said, No, I want to earn money not working! How can you earn money when you don't work? He said, I want to start my own work. So in his culture, they only earn money by starting a business and not working for other people. And he refused to agree to the idea of earning money through working for another person or organization."* (Respondent R4)

"...no, "I can't take a loan," then we are stuck! As I wondered about why they don't want to borrow money, I realized that there is a different reason which is a combination of both their cultural and religious belief system. For instance for most Syrians who are Muslim, they are not allowed to pay interest yet when you take a student loan for example you have to pay interest" (Respondent R9).

"...I can't ask an Iranian about their mental health directly. I once asked one Iranian about their mental health and the person perceived it to be like I was thinking that he is mad or insane! Hence I must know which culture and then be sensitivity to the kind of questions I ask. So it may be right to ask all the other questions about health but not one involving mental health. I have to phrase it differently. This is important for me to know..." (Respondent 7)

"I have met people who are not comfortable talking about their problem. And so I didn't know anything about their issues in the planning meetings. Because in their culture they probably do not share a problem with someone they do not trust yet. This happened with a job seeker for whom I arranged several meetings but didn't not say anything to me. And then after 2 months of planning, she talked to another person she had a relationship with and then that it's that person who called me and told me about the problem"(Respondent R7)

"...a contract when it comes to work is understood differently. This is something I encountered and was extremely surprised, In Sweden a contract between 2 people is a responsibility of each one of them but in Japan, it's not like that, when you write a contract, it means you are to continue working together not necessarily it being a responsibility of either of the parties. It's understood to be the beginning of the working together" (Respondent R14).

Learning by doing Vs Cultural Training

Examples: *"Well, we are trained in Swedish Laws and other regulations regarding the Swedish labour Market but regarding cultural competence, we basically learn by doing. It all comes as you meet the different people and also ask fellow staff about different cultural aspects that you find different"* (Respondent R9).

"It is the real experiences that count in these cultural aspects. If they try to educate us, we would say, "no, that's not how we do it" (Respondent R5)

"Being culturally competent is something that I have gained through my work experience and it's difficult to point to any specific cultural skill that does not come down to learn by doing"(Respondent R6)

"I think it's good that we do not formalize how we work in multicultural work places or with people from diverse backgrounds. Instead, the best approach is to just get to work with people and learn

from the daily experiences that are created through the work. Being open-minded is really important” (Respondent R8)

“If I was sent to a formalized cultural training, I think I would educate the teacher instead...I have the rich experiences of interacting, supporting and helping people from different cultural backgrounds. I have stories of what I have learned and that enables me to get skilled at working in such an environment” (Respondent R 14)

“I go to many seminars about cultures and I try to meet people from different cultures to learn how they do things. I have friends from different cultures. And also, many of my colleagues come from different cultures like Iran, Iraq, Africa, Romania, Syria... almost all over the world. So we try to help each other too” (Respondent R7)

“...The most important element is learning by doing. I do something and then understand how it works. And know if it works or does not for me the next time...” (Respondent R14)

*“We have a kind of course...but the training we receive is mainly on the regulations and rules for the operation of this office and our work. Mainly about equality. And we learn that everybody is the same and we have to respect everybody. We do not have a special kind of training that addresses our interaction with people from other cultural backgrounds”
(Respondent R13)*

*“...It’s a package of learning from experience, passion, questioning and listening. And also respect. So it’s like a cycle of listening, experiencing, doing it and learning it”
(Respondent R5)*

Work Experience in a culturally diverse workplace or environment

Examples: *“This specific area and office is extremely multicultural in Gothenburg and after working in this area for many years, the multiculturalism in this area kind of mixes with you. It becomes so part of you. Because this is what you see every day at work and even in the area where the office is situated. It becomes something that you’re used to. It becomes something that starts to feel comfortable” (Respondent R9)*

“I say to my friends when they tell me that there going on holiday to see the world. And I tell them, I see a lot of the world 40 hours a week when I go to work. I don’t need to go abroad to see the world. I meet it every day at my workplace”. (Respondent R14)

“So having the ability to work and serve people from different cultural backgrounds for 19 years now is not something that I have learned at once. It’s been a whole lot of experience and a combination of many things in my work life and part of my personal life” (Respondent R10)

2 Cultural Perspectives important in Cross Cultural Interactions; Group Vs Individual

Examples: *“Well, I would say that different people have different cultures and yes, I have my culture and you have your culture but it may not be everything. Your culture may make up only 5% of what you are or what someone is for example. And the other section is entirely the individual. And if you focus on the smallest part. That’s where most of the prejudice comes in. So I try to avoid that. I look at every individual uniquely” (Respondent R11).*

“...when it comes to cultural interaction, you always have to stand on 2 legs. 1. You have the cultural influences on a person which are kind of a group phenomenon and 2. You have the individual which is totally different. So it’s always a kind of balance between the group phenomenon and the individual who is always unique...”(Respondent R9)

“All people are unique and it’s always a unique experience when you meet them and have an interaction with them. I find it quite difficult to make a kind of a general statement about my cultural experience. There are certain cultural differences for example women in the Middle East have a different situation in their country different from what the Swedish women have. That’s if you compare groups” (Respondent R4)

“...it is important that I handle each person as an individual because I have come to understand that most of them come from different cultural backgrounds. So I have to think and know...okay, how to engage this person from say Iraq, I have to think of the right questions to ask them...” (Respondent 12)

Each cultural encounter as a new learning experience

Examples: *“The fun thing about my work is that every person who comes in is different and unique and from another culture in most cases. That’s the fun part for me.... I am blessed in that way that I have to do very little administration.... But mostly, I have talk and listen and help these people. The things you learn from each person are many. I have the best job here. I really like my work.” (Respondent R5)*

“...meeting people from different cultures are such a fascinating aspect of my work. I can get tired of doing all the other things but not interacting with people from different cultural background than mine. I am considering working for an extra year. I love this work. Because there will always be a new individual different from one you have met before. So every person you meet is a new experience to learn”(Respondent R9)

“...after meeting over 100 people from Iraq in these meetings, I know quite a lot. I feel like I know everything but people are different. I can discover something new in every meeting...” (Respondent R4)

“...Speaking with every person is a new school for me because I can understand everybody much better with that conversation that I get to have one on one in the meetings I have with clients” (Respondent R7)

Personality attributes & traits

Examples: *“You need to be kind; it’s so nice when you connect with people deeply that they feel that you understand them. For example I live in area X and when I take a tram home, some of the people who come to my office notice me on the tram and I hear them say hi to me and others go like....eeeeeh there goes our handlegare”(Respondent R13).*

“You need to work with passion and commitment...but you have to be the right person and you have to be made of the right stuff. Working with different cultures can be stressful, you meet a lot of people all the time, and there is a lot of work to do in understanding their perspective” (Respondent R9).

“There is a certain type of people who get attracted to working in such areas and stay. It has something to do with attitude and sacrifice too”. Respondent R4)

“...so the key skills are that you have to be that kind of person. More like have a personality that is needed to work there. So if you’re conservative and inflexible and authoritative, you won’t like working here... I don’t think it’s something you can learn. You either that kind of person or you are not.” (Respondent R10)

“...the personal qualities of the person matters a lot. People who tend to work in diverse work places should have the ability and willingness to work in such contexts.” (Respondent R11).

“...the clue is to show interest in the other party. When the person in front of you feels like you’re interested, I think it’s quite easy to get them to talk and they will not feel intimidated and will open up” (Respondent R9)

“If you show interest things will turn out well. Because people are different and some people may have problems, so showing interest in talking to someone is good to having effective cross cultural interactions” (Respondent R5)

“...you need to open minded and be informed about other cultures and be willing to meet the new people” (Respondent R13)