The coffee room as threshold – social dynamics in workplaces in Finland

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“Well, like, from what I have seen, Finns do not especially overwork – - I think that would be safe to say that they work only half the time they are supposed to work, but most of it are coffee breaks, chitchat, they send some stupid emails.” The excerpt is from an interview with an unemployed IT-specialist, who found it rather difficult to become a member of the professional community in his previous workplace.

In this paper, we spotlight social dynamics and especially the nature of social situations in workplaces in Finland. We zoom in on coffee rooms as a key focal setting and explore how professionals with a migrant background experience and perceive the social dynamics of this social institution.

Our data consists of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork amongst IT-specialists, teachers and employees of non-governmental organizations. The data has been collected as part of the “Transforming Professional Integration” (ISIS) project, funded by the Academy of Finland (2011–2014). In ISIS, the relationship between migration and employment has been problematized with a simultaneous focus on: 1) settings in which migrants are preparing to participate in work and professional communities; 2) settings in which migrants have successfully entered work and professional communities, and 3) settings in which migrants have been marginalized from work and professional communities.

The analysis of our data illuminates the double-edged nature of the coffee room that can be a space for both inclusion and exclusion. Our analysis also shows the relationship between participants’ narratives, professional trajectories and the structural power of workplaces as social institutions. In conclusion, we discuss the implications for Nordic egalitarianism.

Keywords: workplaces, migrants, social dynamics.