



**SCHOOL OF
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Navigating the Periphery: A Qualitative Study of Expatriate Experiences of Cultural Diversity in Scandinavian Workplace

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Abstract

International professional mobility has increased significantly in recent years, yet the workplace integration experiences of self-initiated expatriates remain underexplored in academic literature. While Scandinavian workplaces are characterized by formally inclusive organizational cultures, equitable policies and strong DEI commitments, international professionals sometimes perceive the gap between formal inclusion and genuine social belonging which demonstrates a condition that existing frameworks have not been explained sufficiently.

This study examines how self-initiated expatriates and local professionals perceive and navigate formal and informal dimensions of workplace inclusion in Danish and Swedish organizational workplaces. A qualitative research method has been adopted through semi-structured interviews with participants comprising international professionals and local employees across Denmark and Sweden.

The findings reveal peripheral inclusion as a state of formal organizational presence alongside informal social and motivational peripherality. Scandinavian organizations often provide hygiene-level inclusion while formal provisions that prevent dissatisfaction without producing motivational belonging which produces a gap between formal and informal inclusion that Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory illustrates. The same egalitarian values that drive formal inclusion simultaneously legitimize informal exclusion through culturally normalized boundary-keeping practices which constitutes an egalitarian paradox specific to the Scandinavian context. Furthermore, peripheral inclusion stabilizes rather than resolves itself through adaptation which extends Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice and loyalty framework, suggesting international professionals actively manage their peripheral position without challenging its structural conditions. This study applies and extends Rennstam and Sullivan's (2018) peripheral inclusion framework to self-initiated expatriate professionals in Scandinavian workplaces, contributing the egalitarian paradox and adaptation as original theoretical observations grounded in empirical data.

Key words: Self-Initiated Expatriates, Scandinavian Workplace Culture, Peripheral Inclusion, Cultural Diversity

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As a prominent high-welfare zone in Europe, Scandinavia has emerged as a leading destination for international professionals (Walter & Matar, 2024) driven by its generous and inclusive social security systems, proactive labor market policies, and an egalitarian workplace culture supported by multidisciplinary frameworks (Rydland et al., 2023). Across various industries, distinguished professionals from diverse national backgrounds have chosen to settle in the region, seeking to achieve sustainable career development. This shifting dynamic is obvious in critical public sectors. For example, the Nordic region is welcoming more internationally educated nurses (IENs). Researchers have been analyzing expert opinions on migration and integration policies for these nurses (Floro et al., 2024). This research helps shape future policies, ensuring the region's institutional framework keeps pace with its evolving, international talent ecosystem.

Denmark and Sweden, which are closely connected by the Öresund Bridge, serve as a prime example of regional collaborative development (Ejermo et al., 2022). By linking Copenhagen and Skane, this integrated cross-border region creates a more convenient, flexible, and enriched working environment for international professionals, which breaks down national borders for international professionals, allowing them to access highly complementary industrial clusters and job markets in both locations within a one-hour commute.

For these global talents, this seamless geographical connection means they are no longer limited by the market size of a single country but are instead immersed in a more inclusive and diverse international workplace ecosystem. This highly integrated ecosystem not only broadens career opportunities for them but also enables them to flexibly leverage the premium resources of both countries, which sometimes makes the Öresund Region the top destination for international professionals seeking to settle and develop their careers in Scandinavia.

However, as this continuous influx of “fresh blood” significantly enhances the diversity of the local workforce, the challenge of workplace integration for international talent has become increasingly noticeable. This integration involves more than just professional adaptation; it requires expatriate specialists to navigate highly flattened, de-hierarchized organizational

structures and to comprehend the deeply rooted logic of egalitarianism (Yang & Julianne, 2018) that underpins them. Consequently, a compelling question arises: whether these local egalitarian values can be precisely translated into a genuine capacity for inclusion toward diverse backgrounds, and whether they could be effectively applied to support the long-term career development of international professionals.

1.2 Research Problem Statement

In current cross-cultural workplace research, scholars have widely recognized and extensively explored the impact of explicit barriers, such as linguistic requirements and formal qualifications on international professionals. However, the implicit, informal, and cultural barriers that hinder the deep integration of non-native talent require further investigation. As demonstrated by a qualitative study by Skjeggstad and colleagues (2017), involving in-depth interviews with International Medical Graduates (IMGs) and their Norwegian colleagues regarding workplace collaboration, a noteworthy phenomenon of mutual silence underscores the current state of Peripheral Inclusion (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018): foreign professionals often conceal their doubts or shortcomings to maintain a professional image of “competence” such as face-work. Meanwhile, driven by egalitarianism (Yang & Julianne, 2018) and a consensus oriented culture, local colleagues often resort to “polite indifference” to avoid providing direct feedback (Skjeggstad et al., 2017).

This phenomenon suggests that, beyond the aforementioned factors, there are multiple demographic variables, such as educational background and ethnic identity, influencing the integration of foreign talents into the local workforce. However, empirical research that qualitatively unpacks the subtle cultural dynamics of these intersecting variables remains relatively limited. Furthermore, a significant cognitive gap exists regarding the differentiated experiences between newly arrived expatriates and those with years of local work experience. This research gap limits our insight into a critical reality: even when formally accepted by local staff, expatriates lack genuine inclusion within the workplace culture, ultimately constraining their long-term career development.

1.3 Research Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the underlying dynamics through which expatriates navigate cultural inclusion in Scandinavian workplaces. This study aims at providing valuable insights for both Scandinavian employers seeking inclusive practices and diversity management and international professionals navigating inclusion in their workplace. Therefore, it addresses the gap for existing research in discussing self-initiated expatriates, diversity management, and cultural diversity unfolds in Scandinavian workplace settings. In order to fulfill the research purpose, we will mainly focus on the following three research questions:

- 1. How do demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, language proficiency, and educational background interact with Scandinavian workplace cultural norms to shape the integration experiences of international professionals?*
- 2. How do locals and expats perceive and navigate the formal and informal dimensions of workplace inclusion within the Danish and Swedish workplace?*
- 3. What socio-cultural dynamics and organizational practices shape the career experiences of international professionals in Scandinavian workplaces?*

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of expatriates' experiences, these three research questions have been structured within a progressive, multi-layered framework. Research Question 1 establishes the research baseline by examining how individuals' multiple identities, such as ethnicity and language, intersect with Scandinavian workplace culture. Shifting from individual attributes to workplace dynamics, Research Question 2 explores relational and structural processes, examining how Swedish and Danish locals and expatriates seek to position themselves within formal and informal frameworks of inclusion. Finally, Research Question 3 synthesises the above insights by assessing the cumulative, long-term impact of these socio-cultural and organisational dynamics on the career trajectories of international professionals.

1.4 Scopes & Demarcations

Due to the consideration of the practicality of the content and research design, there are some limitations we had to address. The geographic scope needs clarification before we proceed. The

word “Scandinavia” is a geographical location describing Denmark, Sweden and Norway and in a looser meaning can also include Finland and Iceland due to the cultural proximity. There has been an established concept of “Scandinavian Management” in academia, highlighting the shared similarities not only in their culture and language but also in management practices and the concept has been under researched for the last two decades (Grenness, 2003; Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004; Warner-Søderholm, 2012). However, due to the logistic constraints and time scope, we exclude Norway from the research as we will conduct qualitative interviews with professionals working and residing in Denmark and South Sweden. Data analysis and outcomes will only reflect the reality of expatriate experience in Denmark and Sweden, as Warner-Søderholm (2012) pointed out the existing differences between each individual Scandinavian country. To ensure a precise empirical focus within this scope, while broad Nordic-level research, such as Floro et al. (2024), provides invaluable macro-level insights into national migration frameworks, this thesis specifically narrows its geographical and institutional scope to the Öresund Region. Given the unique cross-border integration and the distinct institutional interplay between South Sweden and Denmark, this localized demarcation allows for a deeper, more nuanced investigation into the specific realities of this binational talent ecosystem. Nevertheless, the study adopts the term “Scandinavian workplace” as a general umbrella term.

While empirical claims will remain bounded by the Danish and Swedish context, literature addressing expatriate experiences in Norway will be discussed. Besides, the study also acknowledges the varied terminology used in academia to describe individuals working outside of their homeland.

For clarity and accessibility, this study adopts the terms “expatriates” and “international professionals” as general umbrella terms. In addition, the study will exclude gender as a primary analytical focus because this is an already well-researched and independent topic to maintain the focus on cultural diversity (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018). Should the participants disclose their gender-related real-life experience during the interview, we will acknowledge the participants’ accounts but it will not be our focus in the study. Last but not least, the research focuses on cultural integration and lateral workplace dynamics in terms of career directions (Larsson et al., 2003). Therefore, career progression or career development, whilst it is important to the participants and somewhat relevant to our research topic, will not be our main focus in the research.

1.5 Outline

This thesis is structured into six chapters, following a logical progression from the theoretical foundation to the emergence of a grounded theory regarding expatriate integration in Scandinavia. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and the specific context of the Öresund region, while Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework by reviewing literature on subtle discrimination, DEI and peripheral inclusion. Chapter 3 details the methodology, justifying the choice of constructivist grounded theory and the cumulative data collection process. The specific map coding ways and empirical findings are presented in Chapter 4, followed by a critical discussion in Chapter 5 that focuses on two main themes of identification and adaptation. Finally, Chapter 6 answers the research questions, summarizes the study's contributions, acknowledges its limitations and provides practical recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs)

International professional mobility has expanded significantly in recent decades, contributing to a diverse population of individuals who reside and work outside their country of origin. Within the context of expatriate research, there is a fundamental distinction between assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates. Assigned expatriates are individuals sent abroad by their employers and SIEs are individuals who relocate independently to a foreign country and seek opportunities without any organizational support or sponsorship (Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013).

SIEs are characterized by several features that shape their workplace integration experiences. In addition to their voluntary and self-initiated nature and the absence of organizational support, SIEs typically seek stable and regular employment and commit to an open-ended stay in the host country rather than a predetermined assignment period (Koveshnikov & Lehtonen, 2024; Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013). In comparison to organizationally assigned expatriates, SIEs have no pre-departure preparation or relocation support, meaning they have to navigate social norms and informal dynamics of the workplace culture entirely independently and without institutional assistance (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). The absence of organizational assistance therefore leaves SIEs without the formal workplace orientation and cultural guidance compared to assigned expatriates.

The absence of institutional preparation and assistance carries significant consequences for SIEs' workplace integration. Without organizational support, SIEs must decode the informal norms and social practices of their new workplace environment entirely through direct experience and observation (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Leaving SIEs to navigate the dynamics of workplace relationship building and inclusion entirely through their own initiatives. Furthermore, because SIEs commit to an open-ended stay without an organizational safety net, the stakes of integration are significantly higher than for assigned expatriates, making the experience of informal exclusion particularly consequential for their psychological wellbeing, sense of belonging and long-term career development (Koveshnikov & Lehtonen, 2024).

The concept of expatriate failure provides a useful lens through which to examine the challenges faced by SIEs. Expatriate failure is defined as the premature return of an organizationally assigned expatriate before assignment completion, which is a firm-centred definition that views failure as binary and without consideration of the individual's experience or personal goal (Harzing & Christensen, 1995). Although the concept was originally developed to address the organizational outcomes of assigned expatriates, it partially explains the challenges SIEs navigate. However, in Guttormsen and colleagues (2018) research, they reconceptualized failure, demonstrating the expatriate's desired international experience is more important than formal assignment completion. Furthermore, it also reveals the expatriates forming their own social circles with limited intercultural engagement (Guttormsen et al., 2018). The reconceptualization of failure is relevant to our topic of self-initiated expatriates navigating informal social dynamics at the workplace while simultaneously experiencing informal social exclusion and limited genuine workplace belonging.

2.2 Expatriate Workplace Culture

According to Peltokorpi and Zhang (2022), integrated bicultural expatriates are defined as individuals who exhibit strong identification with both the host country's culture and its language. This dual-identification enables them to integrate deeply into the local environment and effectively drive business localization, a profile that closely aligns with the experienced expatriates group in this study. For these individuals, being part of the host country is central to their professional identity, leading to a profound respect for local cultural norms and work practices.

This alignment is manifested in three key dimensions. First, there is a clear correlation between tenure and the accumulation of cultural capital (Peltokorpi & Zhang, 2022). The longer expatriates remain in the host country, the more likely they are to cultivate diverse social networks and deepen their cultural embeddedness. In the context of global talent mobility, this form of cultural capital can be understood or defined not merely as familiarity with the dominant culture, but as a dynamic set of cultural resources and adaptive skills, such as navigational and social capital, which international professionals actively mobilize over time to maneuver through unfamiliar institutional norms and workplace cultures (Bai & Wang, 2024). Second, they serve as organizational "lubricants" for corporate development and internal communication. By identifying with both their home and host cultures, experienced expatriates act as effective intermediaries to

navigate complex cross-cultural relationships (Kawamura & Dolan, 2015). These individuals function as “linking pins” that bridge the gap between headquarters and subsidiaries, as well as between the expatriate community and host country nationals. In this regard, they play a crucial role in global diversity management by moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to a more contextualized perspective (Syed & Tariq, 2017). They ensure that diversity policies are not merely imposed by HQ but are socially responsible and adapted to the specific legal and cultural realities of the host country.

Finally, this group is distinguished by their Cultural and Language Identification (Peltokorpi & Zhang, 2022). Integrated bicultural individuals view the host country’s language as a core component of their identity rather than merely a functional tool for communication. Consequently, experienced expatriates typically possess not only technical expertise but also a heightened sense of cultural sensitivity and linguistic adaptability. As Syed and Tariq (2017) emphasize, such individual-level agency is vital in a globalized world, where the success of diversity management relies on leaders who can reconcile universal organizational objectives with diverse local identities and workplace pressures.

2.3 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

However, the potential of these integrated bicultural expatriates cannot be realized in an organizational vacuum. Their success as lubricants and linking pins is fundamentally contingent upon the broader systemic environment, specifically, how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are managed within the host organization (Singh-Sengupta et al., 2024).

As highlighted by Mihaylova and Rietmann (2025), their research adopts a novel perspective by examining the promotion of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in East Asian enterprises through the lens of local employees. DEI is far more than an inherently positive organizational initiative. It represents a highly complex process that requires deliberate management to avoid triggering deep psychological and organizational resistance (Singh-Sengupta, 2024). In this context, while experienced expatriates often proactively strive to integrate into the Scandinavian workplace (Kumpikaitė et al., 2022), for instance, by acquiring local educational backgrounds or attaining high levels of linguistic proficiency, their success remains heavily dependent on the genuine acceptance of the local workforce.

However, when DEI initiatives are poorly implemented or perceived as top-down impositions, even integrated bicultural expatriates may be viewed as a cultural or professional threat, thereby inadvertently triggering local resistance. This dynamic is further elucidated by the “meso-level” theory (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025), which suggests that experienced expatriates, acting as vital organizational pillars, are uniquely positioned to mediate conflicts between headquarters and local team backlash. In contrast, newly assigned expatriates who lack an understanding of the local micro-psychology may unintentionally trigger a “backfire” effect, where well-meaning diversity policies result in damaging unintended consequences. For instance, as empirical evidence indicates, disclosing diverse educational backgrounds, such as first-generation university status, can unintentionally activate “deficit thinking” among local employers within specific DEI frameworks (Belmi et al., 2024, as cited in Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025). Consequently, rather than facilitating professional validation, such educational disclosures may be misconstrued through local cognitive biases, thereby reinforcing systemic marginalization instead of driving genuine integration.

2.4 Subtle Discrimination

In contrast to the blatant discrimination where minorities are denied a job or promotion or unequal pay, etc, which is a practice that is no longer socially and legally accepted in contemporary workplace contexts, it has been supplanted in many organizational contexts by “modern racism” or “aversive racism” (Deitch et al., 2003). In a modern workplace, discrimination happens more in the form of “microaggression”, such as intentional avoidance, unfriendly verbal comments or the deliberate withholding of necessary assistance (Pettigrew & Martin, 1987, as cited in Deitch et al., 2003). It operates as an everyday form of discrimination which is a direct contrast to the traditional blatant discrimination because of denial and ambiguity in contexts (Deitch et al., 2003; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011).

Within subtle discrimination, the concept of Attributional Ambiguity means the uncertainty from the perspective of the expatriate about whether a negative interaction is caused by prejudice or unrelated reasons (Deitch et al., 2003; Dipboye & Johnson, 2004). The ambiguity makes the expatriates hesitant to identify their experiences as instances of discrimination (Deitch et al., 2003). The resulting ambiguity not only hinders the interaction among colleagues but produces significant

negative consequences on expatriates' well-being and success at the workplace (Dipboye & Johnson, 2004).

Van Laer and Janssens (2011) also suggested the excessive help from the supervisors is also a sign of subtle discrimination because of its apparently benevolent character. It presents itself as a supportive gesture and simultaneously signals an implicit disregard for the expatriate's professional skills and capabilities (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Additionally, through the lens of aversive racism, it may further manifest in supervisory behavior that, while appearing supportive on the surface, reflects an implicit distrust of expatriates' professional capabilities and skills (Dipboye & Johnson, 2004; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). This form of subtle discrimination is particularly difficult to identify and challenge because of its ambiguity (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011).

Building on the DEI framework discussed above, formal DEI initiatives predominantly address what Herzberg (1966) identifies as the hygiene level of workplace experience, the structural conditions that prevent formal dissatisfaction, while leaving the motivational level of genuine recognition and belonging insufficiently addressed. Formal DEI initiatives are designed to prevent blatant discrimination which formal organizational frameworks are primarily designed to prevent. However, aversive racism operates at the motivational level through unconscious psychological processes embedded in the informal dynamics of everyday workplace interaction which is beyond the reach of structural organizational intervention.

In addition, Van Laer and Janssens (2011) identify four processes through which subtle discrimination manifests in organizational contexts. Normalization is about expatriates facing “normalizing gaze” as co-workers constantly ask cultural difference related questions that become too excessive; Legitimization of Only the Individual is about complimenting an individual expatriate while simultaneously excluding the entire group; Legitimization as “the Other” is about the excessive assistance from the supervisor and the inclusiveness being surface-level; Naturalization is about the seemingly tolerant jokes in the workplace become normalized and difficult for expatriates to resist (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). While the discrimination is subtle, its impact is not. Because of normalization and naturalization, expatriates are worried on an everyday basis, it erodes expatriates' job satisfaction, emotional well-being and physical health (Deitch et al., 2003).

2.5 Herzberg's Two-factor Theory

The preceding sections provided the foundation for understanding the relevant subject of this research. This sub-chapter will introduce Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory as an analytical lens which proposed a fundamental conceptual framework of how satisfaction and dissatisfaction operate in organizational settings. Challenging the oversimplified assumption of satisfaction and dissatisfaction represent the opposite ends of a spectrum, the theory suggests there are hygiene and motivation factors.

According to Herzberg's (1966) framework, Hygiene factors refer to the external conditions surrounding the work that prevent dissatisfaction when adequately imposed but it does not produce genuine satisfaction in their presence at the workplace, for instance, company policy, working conditions (Herzberg, 1966). The presence will only produce a neutral state of non-dissatisfaction where employees will not feel positive about it while the absence will directly translate to active dissatisfaction. On the other hand, motivation factors refer to the intrinsic dimensions of the work experience itself that produce satisfaction and engagement when it is present at the workplace, for instance, recognition and genuine belonging (Herzberg, 1966). Therefore, the relationship between the two suggests the removal of dissatisfaction through hygiene level provision does not directly produce satisfaction.

The framework retains significant analytical utility for our study. The formal inclusion provisions characteristic of Scandinavian workplaces, for example, equitable policy and English as the official working language at the workplace can be understood as hygiene level measures that prevent formal dissatisfaction without producing motivational conditions of genuine belonging and recognition. The distinction between the two provides the acute analytical lens for understanding the gap between formal inclusion and genuine belonging which the concept of peripheral inclusion demonstrates. Therefore, the framework is applied in chapter 5 discussion to interpret the findings of this study.

2.6 Exit, Voice, Loyalty

Similar to the previous sub-chapter, Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice and loyalty (EVL) framework also offers an analytical lens for understanding why peripheral inclusion persists as an organizational condition for international professionals in Scandinavian workplaces. Hirschman's

(1970) theoretical framework demonstrates each option shaped by the structural conditions of the organization and the individual's psychological relationship to it. Moreover, because of the popularity and applicability of this theoretical framework across different fields of research, many scholars have applied this framework and even have build-up contributions to it, like Farrell's (1983) interpretation on adding neglect as another option.

Based on Hirschman's (1970) theoretical framework, exit refers to leaving the organization which a dissatisfied member removes themselves from rather than attempting to change the situation; voice refers to staying and actively attempting to change the situation through complaint and advocacy channels which requires the motivation to speak up; loyalty refers to an active psychological attachment that sustains hope for improvement, fostering an environment which members toward voice rather than exit. As aforementioned, Farrell (1983) included the fourth response, neglect. Neglect refers to a passive and disengaged continuation that lacks the psychological commitment that loyalty requires. In contradiction to loyalty's active and hopefulness mentality from the members of the organization, it demonstrates the member staying without hope or meaningful engagement which deteriorates without active response.

Applied to the experiences of self-initiated expatriates navigating peripheral inclusion in Scandinavian workplaces, Hirschman's framework provides an analytical lens for understanding why peripheral inclusion persists as an organizational condition. The theoretical framework aims to interpret how these structural constraints shape the responses available to international professionals experiencing peripheral inclusion and even propose an extension that the findings of this study suggest the existing framework from Hirschman (1970) and Farrell (1983) requires.

2.7 Peripheral Inclusion

The preceding sub-chapters have established the theoretical landscape within which the present study is situated. The combination of self-initiated expatriates navigating Scandinavian workplace without organizational support, the cultural norms and informal dynamics, the formal DEI initiatives that address only the structural dimensions of inclusion and the subtle discrimination that operates in the informal inclusion together produce the specific condition of peripheral inclusion experienced by expatriates in Scandinavian workplaces.

Peripheral inclusion, theorized by Rennstam and Sullivan (2018), positions subjects in a “temporary location” that is neither fully inclusive nor fully exclusive, and are always somewhere on the periphery of organizational belonging (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018, p. 189). The concept was developed through a qualitative study of LGB officers in Swedish Police, investigating the dynamics of gender performance and workplace integration in an organizational context characterized by formal inclusion alongside informal exclusionary pressures. The study demonstrates that inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive states but coexisting and simultaneous conditions with informal silencing and voice operating as the primary modes through which exclusion and inclusion are respectively enacted within the same organizational space (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018, p. 179-180). In their theoretical framework, silencing refers to suppression of LGB-related identities and issues through exclusive organizational pressures and voice refers to the affirmation of LGB-related identities through inclusive organizational advocacy (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018, p. 179).

Although Rennstam and Sullivan’s (2018) original study examined LGB officers in Sweden rather than expatriate professionals, the analytical logic of peripheral inclusion gives inspiration for our research study. Similar to LGB officers navigating a formally inclusive but informally exclusionary police culture, international professionals in Scandinavian workplaces are in a position that is formally included within organizational structures while remaining informally excluded from the social networks and genuine belonging. Our research therefore applies and extends Rennstam and Sullivan’s (2018) theoretical framework beyond its original context, investigating peripheral inclusion as a possible condition experienced by international professionals navigating the informal dynamics of Scandinavian organizational life.

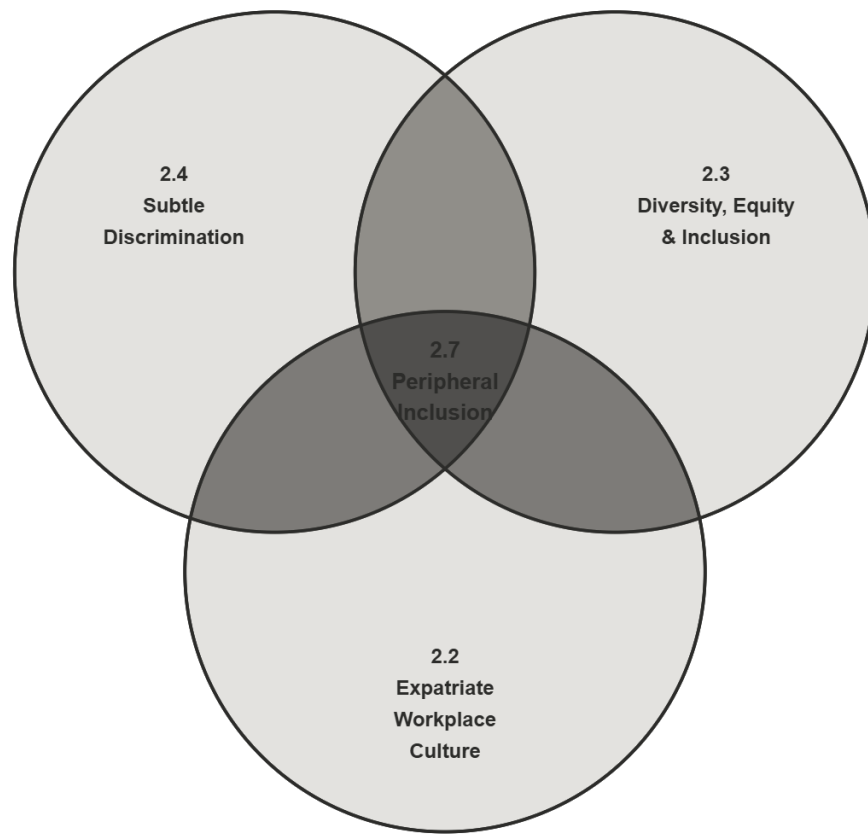


Diagram 1. Conceptual Framework of Peripheral Inclusion

The above diagram provides a visual representation of the conceptual framework in this study. As shown in the diagram, the three circles represent the most important concepts in the literature review, Expatriate workplace culture (2.2), diversity, equity and inclusion (2.3) and subtle discrimination (2.4). Peripheral inclusion (2.7) positioned at the center where all three circles overlap, representing the condition produced which is a state in which international professionals are formally included within the organization while remaining informally excluded (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018). As aforementioned, the theoretical frameworks by Hirschman and Herzberg are not presented in the diagram as they function as analytical lenses applied in chapter 5 discussion. Similarly, self-initiated expatriates are also not included in the diagram as they constitute the subjects of the study.

2.8 Summary

This literature review builds an integrative theoretical framework for understanding peripheral inclusion among expatriates in Scandinavian workplaces, examined through three interrelated core concepts and two analytical lenses.

The structural vulnerability of SIEs forms the foundation of this framework. Without organizational support, SIEs must figure out informal workplace norms entirely on their own (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014), which makes the cost of failing to integrate particularly high (Koveshnikov & Lehtonen, 2024). This vulnerability is further shaped by the limitations of formal DEI initiatives, which, understood through Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, work at the hygiene level by preventing overt discrimination, but do not create the conditions for genuine recognition and belonging. The gap that formal structures leave behind is then filled by subtle discrimination, which operates through everyday microaggressions such as excessive questioning, unnecessary assistance, and surface-level inclusion (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011; Deitch et al., 2003). Because these experiences are difficult to clearly identify, expatriates often struggle to name or challenge them, and the gap between formal inclusion and genuine belonging continues to grow.

This gap also shapes how SIEs respond to their situation, which Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework, extended by Farrell's (1983) neglect, helps to explain. When discrimination is hard to name and formal channels offer little support, speaking up becomes too costly, making exit, loyalty, or passive neglect more likely outcomes. Taken together, these dynamics produce what Rennstam and Sullivan (2018) describe as peripheral inclusion: a condition where international professionals are formally accepted within the organization but remain excluded from genuine social belonging. This is not the result of individuals failing to adapt, but a systematic problem driven by a complex corporate structure, workplace culture, and the inclusion policies.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology we used is presented in this research. First, the decisions on research approach and philosophy are justified and serve the purpose of the research. Second, we will introduce the research design, data collection and follow up with the data analysis. Following up with a reflection on the quality of data (Credibility, Originality, Resonance & Usefulness). Last but not least, it is important to address the ethical considerations and usage of artificial intelligence.

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research strategy, as Bryman (2016) suggests that it is particularly suitable for exploring the subjective meanings and complex social processes underlying human experiences. Meanwhile, our strategy hinges on Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory as we lean heavily into its abductive approach (Charmaz, 2006).

The reason for choosing this approach lies in the exploratory nature of the research, which focuses on the expatriates' experiences of cultural diversity in Scandinavia workplace. After reviewing the existing literature, it is found that concepts such as peripheral inclusion (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018) provides a good conceptual starting point, but it fails to capture the nuance of the Scandinavian context. The real-life working barriers and cultural diversities of the expatriates residing in the Copenhagen and Skåne region may manifest in distinct, under-researched ways. By remaining open to the emergent topics, this abductive approach enables that this study includes not only merely observing the surface-level of participants' accounts but instead dives deeper into the co-construction of understanding of the social processes shaping context-specific culture barriers in the workplace. Therefore, the relationship between theory and research in this study is one where theory is an outcome of the empirical investigation rather than its prerequisite.

By remaining open to emergent topics, this abductive approach moves beyond a surface-level reading of participants' responses and dives deeper into how workplace culture barriers are socially co-constructed. Therefore, the theory in this research functions as an outcome of empirical findings rather than prerequisite.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This study explores expatriate experiences of cultural diversity, which are inherently subjective and context-dependent phenomena. Understanding how international professionals perceive and navigate Scandinavian workplace cultures requires a philosophical stance that acknowledges multiple realities and the socially constructed nature of workplace integration. Therefore, this study adopts interpretivism as its epistemological foundation and social constructivism as its ontological position.

Ontology: Social Constructivism

The reason why this study adopts a social constructivist ontological position is that it views social phenomena as constructed through ongoing interactions rather than existing as fixed entities (Bryman, 2016). In the context of Scandinavian workplace, cultural diversity and workplace integration are not objective states that can be measured uniformly. Instead, they are continuously shaped by daily interactions like cross-departmental meetings and power dynamics between expatriates and their local colleagues. According to Skjeggstad (2017), a typical example is that a Scandinavian colleague's silence during meetings may be interpreted differently. A local may consider it as a sign of respect for consensus culture while an expatriate may think of it as disinterest or even exclusion, which totally shows the different subjective interpretations.

Rather than being fixed and measurable states, culture diversity and integration in the Scandinavian workplace are continuously co-constructed. They manifest in the interactions of our daily life, such as cross-departmental meetings and power dynamics between expatriates and their local colleagues.

By recognizing that workplace realities are co-constructed, this ontological stance allows us to explore how three different stakeholder groups, which are locals, newcomer expats and experienced expats, may hold divergent understandings of the same workplace organizational practices. This is essential to helping understand the following research questions, which investigate the subjective experiences of inclusion and the emergence of career barriers.

Epistemology: Interpretivism

In line with what has been mentioned above, this study also employs interpretive epistemology, which emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their social world (Bryman, 2016). Unlike positivist approaches that seek universal laws, interpretivism recognizes that knowledge about social phenomena emerges from participants' experiences and interpretations, which is particularly suited to exploring expatriate integration in Scandinavian workplace, as the same workplace practice, such as limited feedback from supervisors, may carry different meanings depending on their different cultural background and tenure. For instance, a newcomer expatriate might interpret silence in meetings as subtle discrimination (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011), while an experienced expatriate with deeper cultural understanding might consider it as consistent with consensus workplace culture in Scandinavia (Skjeggstad et al., 2017).

Interpretivism holds that social knowledge emerges directly from participants' lives experiences, making it ideal for exploring expatriates' integration in Scandinavian workplaces. Under this lens, routine practices like limited supervisor feedback are no longer seen as uniform variables. Instead, their meanings shift dynamically depending on the employees' cultural background and tenure.

By engaging in open conversations with three different groups, we recognize that knowledge is inherently co-constructed through dialogue. This pathway aligns with our abductive framework, where theoretical insights not only emerge directly from participants' experience but also shaped through back-and-forth data analysis. (Charmaz, 2014).

3.3 Research Design

Within the qualitative research as mentioned above, this study employs Grounded Theory as a research method. The inductive approach, suggested by American scholars Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, provides a defined and systematic procedure for data collection and analysis which advocates the constant comparative method in giving meaning to data (Goulding, 2002; Locke, 2003; Barbour, 2014). Since the study investigates expatriate experiences in the workplace, and management is about people, behaviour, relationships and communication, applying grounded theory in management research is common (Goulding, 2002).

Among different interpretations of grounded theory, many scholars have developed their own approaches in conducting grounded theory research. The classic Grounded Theory approach was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, which advocates for the deliberate withdrawal of existing mindsets and assumptions about the substantive area in order not to establish a premature idea (Locke, 2003). Strauss and Corbin (2008) propose another version for conducting grounded theory and it is more structured and systematic compared to the previous version. Charmaz (2006) presents her version of constructivist grounded theory, proposing that knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between researchers and research participants. This study adopts Charmaz's constructivist Grounded Theory for the following reasons.

First, Charmaz's (2006) approach emphasizes co-construction. Because our research focuses on the participants lived experiences in their workplaces, the meaning is context-dependent and co-constructed by the researchers and participants. In addition, unlike the classical grounded theory approach, it encourages the researchers to engage in research without existing literature background and theoretical coding is overly abstract for novice or master level researchers (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015; Barbour, 2014). Additionally, in comparison with Strauss and Corbin's approach, axial coding is too prescriptive and technically demanding and procedures can be too complex for novice master level researchers (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Goulding, 2002). Charmaz's (2014) constructivist employs a more flexible approach in data analysis procedures and the flexibility is valuable in our research in studying the social dynamics of cultural inclusion in Scandinavian workplaces.

Due to the geographical and networking barriers, in this context, while Scandinavia includes Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the scope of the study will mainly focus on professionals residing in Copenhagen and Skåne Region. As we proceed to the interviews, the interview subjects are workers working in this region.

3.4 Data Collection

In light of the qualitative research and more specifically grounded theory, different forms of interviews are conducted for the research. Interviews are widely regarded as the primary data collection method in grounded theory research (Walsh et al., 2020), with Goulding (2002)

specifically advocating for semi-structured, face-to-face, open-ended, and in-depth conversational formats as the most appropriate approach for generating rich, contextually grounded data. In order to enrich the variety and diversity of data collection, the research will conduct semi-structured one-to-one interviews, as Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Locke, 2003) described “slices of data”, suggesting different data sources provide different vantage points to understand the topic. For instance, semi-structured interviews present a more fluid and adaptable approach to collecting data. Questions are designed with the same philosophy but with higher flexibility based on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee which is the most common form of interview in qualitative research (Barbour, 2014; Bryman et al., 2019) (See Appendix 1). Because of practicality and logistic reasons for conducting face-to-face interviews, we provide online or offline interview options for our participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

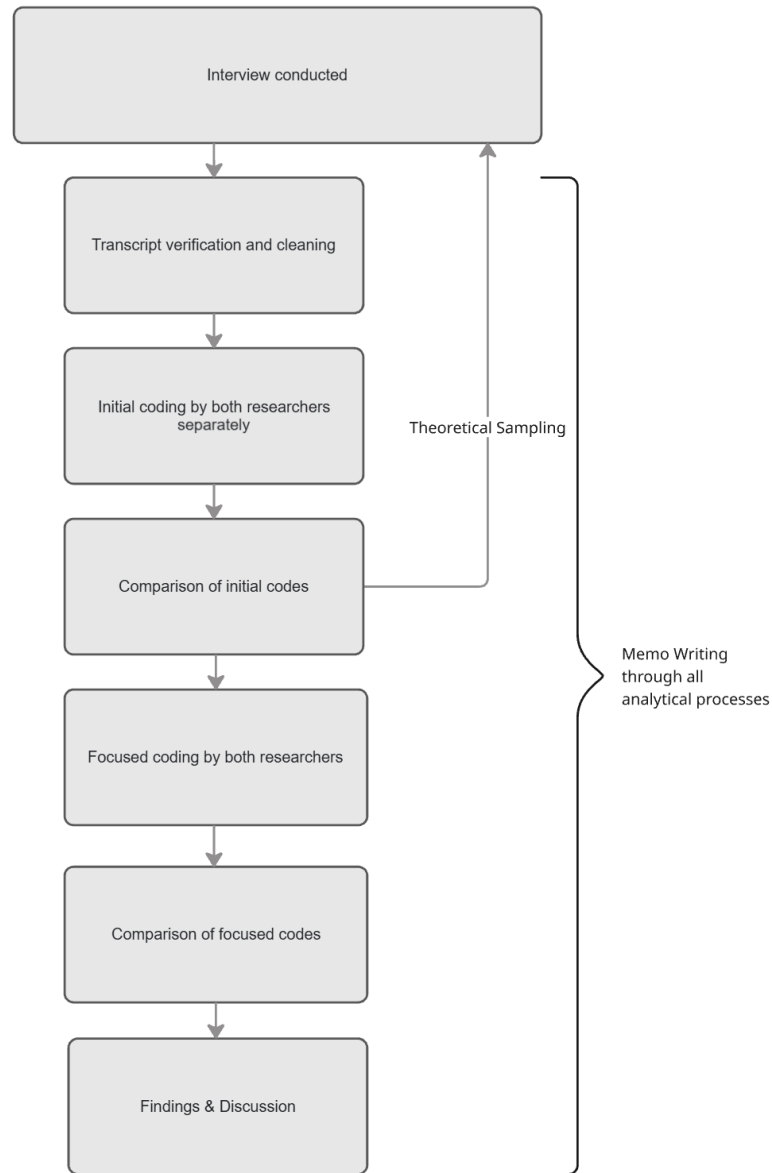


Diagram 2. Data Analysis Process Using Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory

To analyze the data adhering to Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, we divided the data analysis process into different stages. First, we will start initial coding shortly after each interview by breaking down the interview transcripts into short and descriptive labels. By adopting line by line coding, as the most common coding for grounded theorists, it can help us remain open to the data and see the nuances in them (Charmaz, 2014). In this stage, theoretical sampling will take place after each initial coding. The purpose of initial coding is to systematically choose participants

for future interviews, hence, better data collection (Charmaz, 2006, Locke, 2003). Therefore, theoretical sampling is an ongoing process after each interview and initial coding.

Once a substantial volume of initial codes has been generated across the first several interviews, the analysis proceeds to the second analytical stage. Focused coding, according to Charmaz (2014), is to closely examine the most frequent or significant initial codes that can be categorized and synthesized into concepts so as to have a smaller set of codes to investigate. Whereas initial coding generates possible analytical directions by line by line coding analysis, focused coding operates at a higher level of abstraction, conceptualizing larger segments of data into coherent categories to emerge a theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978, as cited in Charmaz, 2014).

In Strauss and Corbin's approach, they proposed Axial Coding as a third coding method to relate categories to subcategories (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, Glaser (1978, as cited in Charmaz, 2014) proposed Theoretical Coding, which can relate the possible relationships between categories developed in the previous focused coding stage. While both coding methods serve to draw a more systematic result from focused codes, it is not a must to apply either of the coding methods in Charmaz's constructivist approach as its main value is about flexibility, not a prescriptive application of certain coding methods in the analytical stage (Charmaz, 2014).

To clarify the data analysis procedure, we will both conduct initial coding separately shortly after each interview. It ensures that we can develop our own analytical perspective without interpretations affecting each other. Once a substantial volume of initial codes has been accumulated after interviews, we will proceed to conduct focused coding and compile our focused codes. In this stage, the process is also done separately and to narrow down numerous initial codes to meaningful and conceptualized categories (Charmaz, 2014). The independently analyzed focus codes will be summarized and synthesized in the theoretical framework in chapter 5 discussion.

In comparison to other qualitative research methods, it aims to create an iterative process and constant comparative analysis, and ultimately a simultaneous data collection and analysis (Walsh et al., 2020; Goulding, 2002, Locke, 2003; Barbour, 2014). After analyzing the first participant, we adjust the questions for the second participant, hence, we can analyze and compare the result between the two participants. We repeat the cycle, compare new data to old data constantly, modify the questions for the next participants accordingly. The interviewing process will start with a

standard expatriate interview and gradually move to assimilated expatriate. In order to have emphasis on theoretical sampling, the interview order and subject can be changed.

3.6 Quality of Data

In this sub-chapter, the methodological approach has been explained. To demonstrate the quality of data in this research, unlike the most commonly used criteria, validity and reliability in most qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019), Charmaz (2006) proposed credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness for grounded theories and approved by other ground theorists (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and the plausibility of data analysis (Tracy, 2010). The credibility of this research is assured through independent and separate data analysis by both of us in order to prevent a single researcher's subjective interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, the constant comparative method and the reflexive memo writing throughout the process of data analysis ensures the findings are "plausible and persuasive" (Tracy, 2010).

Originality refers to new and authentic approaches or significant findings of the analysis to the existing research (Charmaz, 2006). The study demonstrates originality through the inspiration of existing literature and conducts semi-structured interviews for authenticity in order to reflect the lived experience of international professionals in the Scandinavian workplaces. Through Charmaz's constructivist point of view, the interaction and co-construction from the semi-structured interview itself assures the originality of the study (Charmaz, 2014).

Resonance refers to, according to Tracy (2010), the research ability to "meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience". In order to demonstrate resonance in the study, open-ended questions encourage a more deep thinking process for the participants. Besides, with the vivid and lived experience accounts from the participants, it will be shown in Chapter 4. In addition, the wide-ranged diversity of participants' background inherently demonstrates resonance of the study.

Usefulness refers to the study's contribution beyond the research context which inspires future research opportunities (Charmaz, 2006). The topic of peripheral inclusion and cultural diversity demonstrates usefulness through revealing the real life experiences of participants being international professionals settled in Scandinavian countries. With the growing trend of diversity

and globalization, the finding offers us insights for larger scale research and international workers in Scandinavian countries to navigate informal dynamics in workplaces.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the ethical considerations of the study being treated importantly in data collection and analysis processes, the concerns are covered by procedural ethics (Tracy, 2010). To achieve procedural ethics, we follow the LUSEM guidelines for processing personal data and provide the informed consent forms to protect the participants' rights. This is also to ensure the study can collect the most authentic and enriched data as it provides psychological and legal safety to the participants. Additionally, disclosure of research intent is also important (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Therefore, the participants of the study are well aware of the nature of the study and their participation in the research is voluntary as it is clearly stated in the informed consent form and briefed verbally before the start of the interview. Signed informed consent forms were obtained from all participants before each interview commenced.

To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants, pseudonyms are assigned to each participant in place of their real names throughout all stages. No identifying information, including but not limited to names, job titles, and company names, is disclosed in this study. Prior to each recorded interview, participants are verbally informed in clear and accessible language that all personal data collected would be treated with strict confidentiality and that their anonymity would be fully protected throughout the research process. In order to increase flexibility for conducting interviews, we provide online and offline interview options to the participants. Both Microsoft Teams and Zoom are used and the recordings are accessible and kept offline. All interview recordings and transcripts will be permanently destroyed following the submission.

In addition to the procedural ethics, Qu and Dumay (2011) suggest "impose no harm" is a general ethical principle in qualitative research interviews. Interview questions were formulated to be as open and neutral as possible, avoiding leading language that could cause distress.

3.8 Usage of Artificial Intelligence

The use of Gemini and Claude as a supportive tool to assist our thinking and writing process. However, the use of these AI tools did not direct authors' own thought process and critical reasoning.

The use of Sunet is provided and approved by Lund University School of Economics and Management as a tool to transcribe recorded content for data analysis processes. The transcripts are evaluated and edited thoroughly to increase the accuracy and clarity for data analysis in chapter 4 findings.

The use of NotebookLM as a tool to assist our understanding and organization of the research sources, hence, increasing our efficiency in processing academic sources in literature review. All important usage of academic sources is thoroughly reviewed by the authors.

The use of Miro and Claude to create diagrams for clear presentation of concepts.

The use of Zotero is recommended and authorized by LUSEM for referencing management.

All AI-generated outputs were critically evaluated. The ideas, arguments and theoretical contribution presented in this thesis reflect the authors' own analytical work, with AI serving as writing and discussion support.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight participants from diverse professional backgrounds in Scandinavia. The primary objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the nuanced experiences of these individuals as they navigate the complexities of workplace integration. To ensure a rigorous and systematic analysis, the gathered initial coding followed by focused coding, which means that the independent and separate review of the interviews are conducted first and then comes with the joint analysis and discussion. Through initial coding, the raw interview transcripts were broken down into discrete conceptual fragments, which were then synthesized and conceptualized into selective themes during the focused coding phase.

4.1 Introduction

To provide a clear contextual foundation for these findings, a comprehensive participant profile table has been established below, detailing the demographic markers and professional backgrounds of the eight interviewees. Moreover, we will use, for instance, “P1” in the following chapters to refer to the first participant, and so on from P2 to P8.

#	Residing Country	Ethnicity	Local Language Level	Educational Background	Age Group
1	Sweden	Hong Kong	Intermediate	Local Master’s Degree	36-40
2	Sweden	Indonesian	Beginner	Local Master’s Degree	21-25
3	Sweden	Indian	Intermediate	Local Master’s Degree	26-30
4	Sweden	Turkish	Beginner	Local Master’s Degree	26-30
5	Sweden	Chinese	Beginner	Local Master’s Degree	26-30

6	Denmark	Vietnamese	Native	Local Master's Degree	31-35
7	Denmark	Vietnamese	Native	Local Bachelor's Degree	56-60
8	Denmark	Danish	Native	Local Master's Degree	21-25

Table 1. Interview Participants Information

4.2 Demographic Markers and Professional Legitimacy

4.2.1 Language as Social Boundary

The significance of local language in shaping expatriate workplace integration emerged as one of the most consistent findings over the data analysis with more than half of the participants, both local professionals and international expatriates, acknowledged local language proficiency as the most critical factor in fostering workplace integration in Scandinavian contexts.

While English functioned as a sufficient medium for formal professional interaction across participant accounts, findings consistently demonstrated a significant gap between formal language proficiency and informal social inclusion. This gap manifested not merely as passive exclusion when language switching occurred, but as an active participation burden placed on international professionals seeking to maintain inclusion in predominantly local workplace settings. All participants are working in an international workplace environment setting with most of their companies' official language being English, the participants past experience is also valuable to understand the importance of local language proficiency. This dynamic was particularly illustrated in the account of P3, an expatriate currently working in an international company, sharing a scenario during her traineeship program in which approximately 95% of her colleagues were Swedish and she felt forced to speak up in English in order to keep her presence:

“When I was doing my training program, I had to work with another team and it was like 95 percent local people so it was hard for them even though they knew fluent English to accommodate me. It was really hard for me to contribute and work as efficiently as I wanted. I had to actively contribute to the conversation, like I had to come up with

questions or just give random thoughts to make up something so that they wouldn't switch to Swedish."

This account reveals, in a Swede-predominant workplace, expatriates without local language proficiency feel forced to speak up and actively put continuous efforts to make sure the conversation stays in English. Unlike her Swedish colleagues, who could choose when to participate without a similar risk of linguistic exclusion. Therefore, the burden fell entirely on her individual efforts rather than a group's collective effort to include all voices.

However, it is important to note that this pattern did not reflect deliberate or hostile exclusion. P2 described a contrasting experience at her workplace as her colleagues were speaking in Swedish and switched the conversation to English nicely when she joined the conversation. Therefore, her colleagues' behaviour was considerate and inclusive.

Similarly, P5 account showcases the use of mother tongue is merely for better communication among colleagues as his team is composed predominantly of French and Italian colleagues. He described the encounter:

"It's totally normal for people to naturally slip into their native tongues. For instance, if two Chinese or two French researchers are discussing an experiment, they will naturally use their native language for speed and clarity."

It demonstrates the use of language is contextual depending on users intents. Therefore, both P2 and P5 accounts showing speaking in mother tongues do not directly translate into exclusion. However, it is also important to address the possible use of language as an exclusion is not necessarily in a certain language, it is shaped by whichever language happens to constitute the informal majority in their particular workplace context.

While formal organizational intervention can solve the formal linguistic exclusion, the informal exclusion remains a challenge for international professionals. Perhaps the formal-informal language gap can be illustrated by P7. She shares that one of her colleagues is an expatriate who has no proficiency in Danish, yet the official workplace language is Danish. Her account being:

"[My colleague] just came to Denmark, she doesn't speak Danish at all, and I know that she has to translate everything with Artificial Intelligence. But I think there are some

barriers because if you have colleagues who only speak English and are not that good in English, they will talk less to each other, unless it's something about work. Because I have been in many meetings, if there's only one person who doesn't speak Danish, then the meeting will be in English. But the moment that person goes out of the room then it will be in Danish. They prefer not to say anything and when you do that you don't share information and bonding. I think that could be an issue. If you ask me something, then I will help you but if I feel insecure then I couldn't help you in the same way and it feels limited."

This observation is very crucial to the language dimension of peripheral inclusion. P7 mentions the colleague can use AI to deal with her tasks and meetings. From P6 perspective, outside of meetings, AI could not help her chatting with colleagues during coffee breaks at work, hence, it hinders the bonding between her and the local colleagues. Because of this, it addresses the gap between formal and informal inclusion in terms of communication. Therefore, it is precisely what the expatriate can be at, a position of peripheral inclusion as Rennstam and Sullivan theorize (2018).

4.2.2 Workplace Humour and Stereotyping

A further dimension of the demographic markers shaping professional legitimacy in Scandinavian workplaces emerged in participant accounts of workplace humour and cultural stereotyping. While overt prejudice is not intentional, stereotyping in the accounts of international professionals operated through subtle interactions that reduced individuals to cultural representatives.

A recurring pattern across participant accounts was the attribution of workplace stereotyping to cultural misunderstanding and ignorance rather than deliberate prejudice. For instance, the account of P5 about university students living in a cramped dormitory vividly demonstrating the phenomenon:

"I didn't find it offensive at all. It felt quite normal. They just don't know much about the reality in China so their curiosity or confusion is completely understandable."

While P5 did not find the stereotyping offensive, the pattern at a hidden level where the discriminatory behaviour operates through unconscious assumptions and cultural misrecognition which suggests aversive racism (Deitch et al., 2003). The apparent ignorance rather than

prejudicial intent does not diminish the effect of being reduced to a cultural representative and create precisely the attributional ambiguity (Deitch et al., 2003; Dipboye & Johnson, 2004).

The account of P6 also shares a similar view on the subject, he believes that the people who accidentally make wrong stereotyping are more uninformed than being mean. Together these accounts suggest that workplace stereotyping in the Scandinavian context might operate through a dynamic of ignorance rather than vicious intent and it produces professional misrecognition that is ambiguous but still far from being discriminatory.

Furthermore, the attributional ambiguity manifests as a pattern of second guessing that participants normalized as an expected feature of working internationally in Scandinavian workplaces. The account of P5 showcasing his experience about second guessing at his workplace:

“Second guessing absolutely exists. Because everyone comes from a different academic and cultural background, communication gaps happen.”

This account demonstrates the characteristic of second guessing being completely normal reveals how attributional ambiguity becomes not merely an occasional response to specific incidents but a routinized feature in expatriates’ psychological landscape. The normalization also connects to, what Van Laer and Janssens (2011) describes, the naturalization process through which subtle discrimination becomes embedded and the receivers perceive it as usual practice at the workplace.

The psychological dimensions of the stereotyping experience were most vividly illustrated in the account of P6 where he shared his experiences of ethnic stereotyping not only in a professional environment but also his daily experience growing up as a Vietnamese Danish. Along his experiences, he described a three-stage emotional progression:

“Shall we say it was less sensitive back in the days both in the media but also culturally so I found those stereotypes to be super annoying, tiresome and offensive. But as I’ve grown up I’ve just kind of learned how to deal with that in the way that people are going to always be like this. Why be upset by it like it doesn’t really define who I am as a person and better debunk these misconceptions with my own self presenting than getting mad over it.”

“Disregarding my IT stuff but focusing more on the social side of things I will cautiously say that I think some of my co-workers can have some remarks that can sound very wrong.

I know that when I'm around, they will intentionally hold back a little bit. They don't mean it in a mean way but it makes them sound so very ignorant. But I'm used to it."

While the first account is describing his general life experiences growing up, it eventually affects how he reacts to stereotypes and misconceptions at the workplace as we can see in the second account, he is well aware that his co-workers can have some stereotypes not only to him, but also to a specific group of people. However, he is used to those stereotypes and chose to neglect them. This three-stage progression, from troublesome through calm down to neglect, constitutes what Van Laer and Janssens (2011) refer to as naturalization. It is a process through which subtle discriminatory dynamics become so embedded in the daily workplace environment and the individuals are numb towards the stereotyping. In the initial trouble stage, the participant recognizes the stereotype being unfair and potentially discriminatory. He can either voice or exit according to Hirschman (1970). However, the attributional ambiguity, being the uncertainty about whether the experience being prejudicial or merely cultural ignorance, suppresses voice at the earliest stage. The final stage neglect is also important as the participant directly pointed out he has moved on and chose to neglect these stereotypes. With this being said, Farrell (1983) provided neglect as another layer than loyalty from Hirschman (1970) original framework since neglect refers to the passive, disengaged continuation. The account from P6 demonstrates that peripheral inclusion persists as a structural condition, ignorant stereotype from co-workers within the organization through ethnic visibility alone.

4.3 Navigating the Process of Peripheral Inclusion

4.3.1 Surface-level Social Events

When exploring social activities during workplace breaks, the unique Scandinavian coffee culture known as coffee break emerges as an unavoidable and central domain. In an ideal state, these breaks are designed to be casual, relaxing, and free, which is a designated time for employees to rest or engage in informal emotional exchange. It is widely used as a tool for reducing hierarchy and promoting workplace well-being across Scandinavia. However, interviews with the eight expatriates working in Scandinavia reveal that most of them do not like or are even reluctant to actively participate in these social activities. The structural reasons behind this phenomenon clearly show the core meaning of "peripheral inclusion" (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018).

A primary theme from the interviews is the psychological paradox within organized workplace socializing. Many companies schedule coffee break sessions at fixed times throughout the workweek. This “routinized” or “scheduled” setup accidentally changes what was meant to be a flat, equal break for relaxation and team bonding for better collaboration into a stressful space. Instead of a self-driven pause, it becomes a collective ritual that leaves little room for individual choice or genuine detachment from work duties. This ambivalent duality is clearly reflected in P4’s narrative, who initially appreciated the organizational effort but highlighted the underlying tension it creates during high-pressure periods:

“I think it’s really nice that they actually book that time on my calendars where we can breathe and catch up all together... like there’s time booked in every month’s calendar... that we can take that 20 minutes to relax or catch up. But if it’s like a very heavy week, we are loaded with work meetings or things that I have to prioritize. And there are also weeks that I feel like I need to skip instead.”

As this quote illustrates, the institutionalization of coffee break into a permanent calendar fixture strips away the spontaneity of a true break, transforming relaxation into an item on a to-do list. Several interviewees explicitly noted that instead of offering a break from their fast-paced work, these group coffee breaks often turned into a hidden extension of work. During these sessions, conversations inevitably turned toward ongoing projects, effectively changing coffee break into “another form of short business meeting disguised as leisure”.

This shift comes largely from the “implicit mandate” (unspoken pressure) felt when participating in these activities. For expats who have not yet fully integrated into the local culture, attending coffee break is no longer a voluntary choice. Instead, it slowly becomes a mandatory social task. Although participation is not officially forced by company policy, its highly structured and scheduled format blurs the lines between real rest and workplace performance. Expats may feel that their absence would be interpreted as a lack of team spirit or poor organizational commitment, leaving them with no real option but to attend. This forces newly arrived expats to constantly maintain a professional image under the dual pressures of lacking local cultural identity and language proficiency. Consequently, instead of creating a sense of belonging, these routine workplace rituals backfire, increasing the participants’ mental fatigue and keeping them trapped

in a state of peripheral inclusion, effectively making them “physically included, yet culturally isolated”.

Moving the analysis from the institutional framework to the everyday dynamics of actual coffee break interactions reveals deeper barriers at a micro level. First of all, the presence of colleagues from different age groups in the workplace leads to a clear disconnect in conversation topics and shared interests. While coworkers of similar age can easily share stories about their personal lives and relax through casual chats, interactions with local colleagues of different ages, who are at different life stages currently and lack common interests, greatly narrow the scope of conversation. This generation gap often highlights the absence of a shared cultural baseline, making organic connection even harder for expats. This acute sense of demographic and conversational misalignment is vividly illustrated by P2, who contrasted the alienating experience of socializing with older colleagues against the ease of interacting with peers:

“My teammates are like 50, 60-year-old men and I don’t have a lot in common with them to speak about. So sometimes they talk about their children, sometimes they talk about football, hunting and boats, which I am not that interested in. But if I’m with the future talent or like the other trainees, then I have more things to talk about.”

This narrative underscores how casual workplace socialization can inadvertently reinforce an outsider identity when the available topics are rooted in localized, generation-specific lifestyles. Out of professional politeness, expats have to rely on superficial, surface-level topics to avoid awkwardness. Without genuine connection, these small talks eventually and involuntarily loop back to work-related matters.

A deeper barrier lies in the significant cultural differences. The findings show that even when expats and local colleagues occasionally find a topic to talk about, these interactions still carry a clear sense of boundaries and defensiveness to some extent because they lack a deep cultural connection. The conversation rarely moves past polite agreement, as both sides unconsciously avoid topics that might require deeper socio-cultural knowledge. Since expats generally lack a sharp understanding of the unspoken rules and social norms of the local culture, communication can sometimes lead to clear misunderstandings, causing subtle discomfort. This dynamic of

cultural friction and the subsequent need for defensive counterarguments are vividly captured in the experience of P5 during a casual conversation about living standards:

“For instance, when discussing housing, they couldn’t understand why Chinese university students often share a small dorm room among four people, viewing it as a lack of equity or comfort. But I had a solid counterargument. It’s unfair to judge living standards without considering the cost. In China, an undergraduate’s annual dorm fee is only around 600 to 800 RMB. Compared to Sweden, this cost is practically negligible. Finding a student room in Sweden for 800 to 1,000 SEK a year is absolutely impossible. When you explain that this price covers accommodation for a whole year, they find it amazing.”

Although this interaction ended with mutual surprise rather than conflict, it highlights the constant cognitive labor expats must perform to defend their cultural background against the normative assumptions of their Scandinavian peers. Therefore, within this defensive social environment, the conversations of expat employees are strictly limited to the “safe zones” of talking about work or engaging in polite small talk. This seriously stops them from building truly close and deep emotional connections with their local peers. The friction met in these small interactions further delays their journey from the edge to the center of the organization.

4.3.2 Consensus Culture Navigation

With the rapid progress of globalization and frequent talent mobility, cross-cultural workplaces have become the norm. For expatriates working in the Scandinavian corporate environment, the interviews reveal two core conflicts: the tension between consensus-based and efficiency-driven decision-making, and the clash between work-life balance and overwork culture. Under these new workplace norms, foreign employees experience a distinct Scandinavian culture shock that forces them to reshape their professional behaviors. From a conceptual standpoint, traditional efficiency-driven culture, which is still dominant across most of Asia, emphasizes rapid decision-making, strong execution, and a strict result-oriented focus. In contrast, Scandinavian consensus culture prioritizes full participation, continuous alignment of details, and minimizing potential resistance in the later stages of a project. According to Hofstede (2011), this dynamic is deeply rooted in the region’s low power distance and high femininity, where organizational structures favor decentralization, and workplace norms prioritize consensus-seeking and a fundamental “work in

order to live” philosophy. This perfectly aligns with the egalitarian workplace values highly prized in the region.

Interviews with these expatriates show a fascinating psychological gap regarding this first conflict. Although they have behaviorally adapted to the consensus process by regularly attending various alignment meetings, their mindset remains deeply influenced by their home countries. As P1 highlighted in the interview:

“It’s very much consent based. You always want to check with someone. There are lots of stakeholders you need to manage. You sometimes want to wait for people to come back and make the decision or be a part of the decision, but that will very much seldom happen in Hong Kong. If you are on holiday, then we have already made a decision. Then you just catch up on that decision later on. So, I don’t think it’s like that in Hong Kong. You don’t respect people, but you respect time more than respecting people’s feelings.”

This stark contrast shows that they often unconsciously use the extreme efficiency and speed of their previous working cultures to measure current project progress, creating a state of being physically adapted but mentally delayed. Overcoming this cultural inertia requires time for psychological adjustment and mindset shifts. Expatriates must eventually realize that in Scandinavia, maintaining clear boundaries and respecting the team’s overall rhythm are far more important than individualistic high output or personal heroism.

The second core conflict of workplace culture lies in the differing perceptions of working hours. In many Pan-Asian regions, overwork is often viewed as a sign of diligence, ambition, or respect. Reflecting what Hofstede (2011) describes as high power distance cultures, employees in these regions frequently stay at their desks after official hours simply because their manager has not left yet, treating extended working hours as a form of professional respect. However, in the Scandinavian workplace where work-life balance is prioritized, overwork is viewed through a completely different lens. Working late is often interpreted as an inability to finish assigned tasks on time, reflecting low efficiency or poor time-management skills. This alternative perspective is vividly captured in the interviews, where local organizational logic treats overwork as a warning sign rather than a virtue. As P8 explained:

“If you can’t do all of your work within the set amount of time in the day, that means that you’re probably not being productive in the right way... it is an alarm to set up because you should be able to do your assignments within the right amount of time.”

Furthermore, extended hours are seen as a failure of prioritization or workload management, which risks creating a toxic environment for the entire team. The same interviewee noted that:

“If you’re not, then either you’ve gotten too much work on your plate or you’re not prioritizing the right way... so you are creating a pressurizing system.”

Consequently, this systemic pressure explains why pretending to work late just to create a false image of hard work is seen as a lack of transparency and candor, which can negatively impact team morale and the overall corporate environment.

Overall, as a result of their home country backgrounds, expatriates are accustomed to a culture where working hours define professional value, so entering the Scandinavian workforce forces them to face a new moral obligation to leave work on time. This transition requires a conscious shift in mindset to better integrate into the local workplace culture. Ultimately, almost all interviewees expressed strong support for the Scandinavian emphasis on work-life balance, acknowledging its clear benefits for mental and physical health. However, successfully adapting to and integrating into this environment remains a gradual process that requires time, patience, and a fundamental shift in perspective.

4.4 Socio-Cultural Barriers and Organizational Dynamics

4.4.1 Integration Orientation and the Tension Between Cultural Preservation and Belonging

While we investigated the structural conditions that produce peripheral inclusion in Scandinavian workplaces, the findings also revealed the importance of expatriates’ orientation in relation to shaping their peripheral positioning. Three participant accounts present distinct integration orientations that together contribute to peripheral inclusion as a condition experienced differently but consistently across diverse individual responses to the structural dynamics of Scandinavian workplace culture. When asking participants about using a metaphor to describe their relationships

with their workplace, P2 described her as a passenger and transactional in relationship to Scandinavian workplace culture, and this is what she said:

“I like my team, my manager and my workplace but I also realize that this is just work. In a workplace you receive a monthly salary and in return you provide your expertise and bring results to the company. So as much as you develop some kind of attachment to your workplace you should never be attached because you will get replaced ... maybe it’s also our Asian mentality in terms of working.”

P2 characterization of herself as a passenger precisely showing her intent orientation that she is neither disengaged completely from her workplace but she positioned herself at a somewhat distant position. Rather than investing emotional and social energy in pursuing the informal belonging which can be difficult to achieve sometimes, P2 has consciously accepted the terms of her peripheral positioning which she participated professionally while maintaining psychological distance from the social and cultural environment that formal organizational structures make nominally available. Her account shows adaptation rather than pure loyalty or neglect from Hirschman (1970) or Farrell (1983). Her passenger orientation thus represents not a failure of integration but a rational response to the structural conditions of peripheral inclusion.

A contrasting but related orientation demonstrated from P1 who described his adaptation but also consciously preserving his cultural identity in Scandinavian workplace, he said:

“But I think being an expat here, even though I feel included in the company, it is super hard to integrate and I don’t mean that it is completely the responsibility of a company. Because when I see integration, I need to play a big part. The company may need to play a big part ... So I think there are multiple factors to having someone truly integrated ... It is also a matter of whether you want to integrate to the society you’re living in”

P1 account represented a more active response and he provided a more in-depth reflection to adaptation. While he described feeling included in his workplace, he acknowledged that genuine integration remains significantly more challenging than formal inclusion. Having adapted to Swedish workplace norms over several years, P1 described himself as a conscious advocate for preserving his cultural identity. Furthermore, he also sustains his sense of self and marks his peripheral position as a chosen rather than entirely imposed condition. P1’s account illustrates

adaptation is an active and reflective orientation which acknowledges the structural conditions of peripheral inclusion while asserting cultural identity as a deliberate strategy for navigating them.

Unlike P2's conscious strategic distance or P1's cultural identity preservation, P6's peripheral positioning is not a chosen orientation but persistence of ethnic visibility despite full cultural integration, with his account being:

“Even though I can say with full pride that I am Danish but also I am Vietnamese in my background. I will never fully feel like I fit into one because on one hand I have a cultural disconnect with the ethnic background that my family comes from and on the other hand there will always be a hybridization between the Vietnamese culture that I have with the Danish one that I live with.”

While the account is his reflection over his daily experiences growing up in Denmark, he emphasized that it also happens at the workplace. Where P2 and P1's orientations represent conscious responses and adaptation to peripheral inclusion, because of P6's background, his peripheral inclusion can persist as a permanent structural condition even when cultural integration has been fully achieved. Thus, it suggests that ethnic visibility constitutes an independent mechanism of peripheral positioning that individual integration orientation cannot resolve.

Together the three integration orientations demonstrate peripheral inclusion as a condition that persists across diverse individual responses to the structural dynamics of Scandinavian workplaces. The orientations suggest a response to peripheral inclusion that goes beyond Hirschman's (1970) original framework and Farrell's (1983) version by adding neglect, especially with P1 and P2 accounts as they perform different forms of adaptation.

4.4.2 Social Circles and Professional Networks

To successfully integrate into the Scandinavian corporate environment, expatriates need to realize that workplace behavior is deeply intertwined with broader societal values. Therefore, actively adapting to the local social culture can greatly help them better blend into the workplace. In Scandinavia, the traits of egalitarianism and individualism dictate that professional relationships are built on mutual respect for each person's autonomy. When expatriates try to fit into the workplace without understanding the underlying cultural pillars, such as *Janteloven* (the Law of

Jante), which promotes humility and opposes boastfulness, as well as full respect for personal boundaries, their professional actions can easily be misunderstood (Gopal, 2004). For example, an expatriate aggressively pushing their own agenda in a meeting might think they are demonstrating leadership, but local colleagues may perceive it as an offense to social egalitarianism. As Gopal (2004) argues, the Scandinavian concept of equality is often constructed as “sameness”, creating a cultural antipathy to individual differences. Consequently, individualistic dominance in meetings is rejected because it disrupts the collective homogeneity highly valued in the local culture.

This challenge is often rooted in a deeper layer of social exclusion, as true integration requires more than just mastering office protocols. As one interviewee pointed out:

“Sometimes a cultural thing can be very hard to explain... it’s not just a question of workplace integration, it’s about integration in society as a whole. For example, in Danish society you’re not gonna have the same understanding of Danish inside jokes or like pop culture.”

Therefore, by first learning to navigate these broader local social norms outside the office, such as getting used to silence, remaining humble, and practicing low-profile communication, expatriates can truly decode the unspoken rules of the workplace. Ultimately, cultural adaptation at the social level provides expatriates with the cultural context to understand why certain workplace norms exist, allowing them to upgrade from superficial behavioral imitation to genuine, deep integration.

This need to decode the social rules becomes especially urgent when facing the distinctly divided nature of Scandinavian social circles, a unique trait that often makes expatriates experience a sense of exclusion and loneliness. In cross-cultural psychology, Scandinavia is frequently classified as a typical “Coconut Culture” (Meyer, 2015). Its main feature is a thick, reserved exterior that requires a lot of time and trust to break through, which stands in sharp contrast to the “Peach Culture” (Meyer, 2015) found in the United States or parts of Asia, where people seem easy to approach but are difficult to know deeply. Scandinavian social life revolves around highly private, tightly knit circles that are usually formed early in life during school or university, and locals maintain a very strong sense of relationship boundaries. They deeply respect the privacy of others and keep clear divisions between different areas of their lives.

Importantly, this strict separation between social domains is a conscious choice to protect personal freedom and maintain a healthy boundary. P8 explained this dynamic by noting that while Scandinavians talk a lot about daily life on a surface level, they rarely intermix different friend groups because doing so feels like removing a wall of privacy. The interviewee added:

“I think in Denmark and in Scandinavia, in general we are very private people. We will absolutely talk a lot. We will talk about our daily life, but if you do listen, it’s very surface level conversations depending on who it is, and I think often the friends that you have the groups that you have sort of intermixing them can feel a little bit like you’re removing a wall of that privacy. I’m thinking I would say just like what happens at work to stay at work not really because you absolutely go and complain about your work to your friends or vice versa complain about other things in your life to your colleagues, but I do think that you don’t really let the two sides meet cause it gives you a certain freedom that also keep your work-life balance.”

As a result, they rarely mix colleagues, childhood friends, and hobby groups together, nor do they force friends from different circles to get to know each other. To a cultural outsider, this polite distance can easily be interpreted as coldness or rejection. However, this social boundary does not come from hostility, but rather from a cultural instinct of not wanting to disturb another person’s time or comfort zone. Once expatriates successfully crack this “coconut shell” through organized, shared activities, they will find that Scandinavian friendships, though slow to form, are exceptionally loyal, honest, and long-lasting.

5. Discussion

This chapter undertakes an in-depth deconstruction of fragmented workplace phenomena, such as language proficiency, coffee breaks, differences in humor and personal boundaries, primarily within the framework of the Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966) and the Exit, Voice, Loyalty model Hirschman (1970) interpreted in Chapter 2. Specifically, this chapter unfolds along two dynamic threads, which are how expatriates identify these invisible barriers concealed beneath systems of equality, and how they adapt and make strategic behavioral adjustments. Through a theoretical analysis of “identification” and “adaptation”, we will ultimately reveal the operational essence and inherent paradoxes of the unique workplace ecosystem known as “peripheral inclusion” in Scandinavian workplaces.

5.1 Identify and Unveil Invisible Barriers under Formal Inclusion

As evidenced in Chapter 4, most Scandinavian companies provide formally structured multicultural work environments, including English as the official working language, flat organizational hierarchies and consensus-oriented communication norms in meetings. These institutionalized provisions represent what Herzberg (1966) classifies as hygiene factors, extrinsic conditions such as company policy, working conditions, and, in the context of this study, formal inclusion provisions. By establishing these structural safeguards, companies successfully eliminate overt discrimination and legal violations, placing expatriates in a contractually secure position where active dissatisfaction is prevented. As P3’s account illustrates, even in a predominantly Swedish-speaking team environment, the formal designation of English as the working language ensured her professional participation was structurally guaranteed.

However, this structural completeness can unintentionally create an illusion of hygiene factors, blurring the line between administrative inclusion and psychological belonging. Herzberg (1966) noted that hygiene factors only neutralize dissatisfaction without generating proactive satisfaction. In practice, extensive formal provisions risk obscuring a hidden motivational deficit, enabling organizations to prioritize regulatory compliance over the messy, informal interactions that actually drive meaningful integration.

As Chapter 4 also consistently demonstrates, it is precisely at the motivational level that expatriates experience the most consequential form of marginalization. Due to divergent cultural foundations and an absence of cross-cultural emotional resonance, expatriates find themselves structurally unable to penetrate the deeper social core of local colleagues' networks.

With no shared cultural background or emotional bond, expats are often left on the outside, being unable to build deep friendships with local colleagues. Scandinavian social culture, shaped by norms such as *Janteloven* (Gopal, 2004), *the Law of Jante*, which promotes collective humility and the avoidance of individual distinction, alongside a deeply rooted respect for personal boundaries, constructs a social environment that is simultaneously polite and difficult to penetrate. As P8's account of the "coconut culture" (Meyer, 2015) reveals, local social circles are formed early in life and maintained with deliberate separation between different life domains, leaving little structural opening for expatriates to transition from professional acquaintance to genuine social belonging. Coffee breaks, despite its institutional framing as an equal and bonding ritual, consistently remained at the surface level of interaction across participant accounts, including cycling through topics of weather, work updates, and polite small talk without progressing toward the depth of mutual trust and emotional recognition, which Herzberg (1966) associates with true motivational engagement. What expatriates consequently encounter is a motivational vacuum, where the organization provides no structural pathway toward the intrinsic dimensions of workplace experience like deep interpersonal trust, authentic recognition and cross-cultural emotional resonance that generate genuine satisfaction and organizational belonging. Consequently, expatriates feel a lack of motivation since the company fails to help them develop deep trust or real recognition at work, which are the main barriers to genuine job satisfaction and sense of belonging.

Therefore, this gap between hygiene-level formal inclusion and motivational-level relational exclusion leaves expatriates stuck in a painful contradiction. Physically they are completely in, but emotionally they are completely out, which means even though the company takes care of the contractual paperwork, expats are still left on the outside of daily social life.

Beyond the motivational deficit identified at the organizational level, expatriates simultaneously encounter another layer of invisible barriers that are deeply embedded within the informal social fabric of Scandinavian workplace culture. As Meyer (2015) characterizes through the "coconut

culture model”, Scandinavian social life is defined by a hard exterior that is difficult to penetrate, which demonstrates in everyday workplace interactions as a pattern of behavior that can be described as difference. This behavioral pattern is seen as culturally appropriate within the local normative framework, yet from the expatriate’s cross-cultural perspective, it is experienced as social isolation.

Drawing on the accounts of P8 and P2, the findings illustrate how local social circles are deliberately maintained through strict separation between private and professional life domains, how coffee breaks interactions consistently remain at the surface level of topics such as weather and work updates, and how expatriates find themselves with little common ground when socializing with older colleagues during coffee breaks. Together, these accounts demonstrate how the cultural logic of respecting personal boundaries systematically prevents the formation of weak ties, which are the informal connections that serve as foundational pathways toward deeper organizational belonging. What makes this barrier particularly difficult to identify is that because local colleagues do not perceive their own social restraint as exclusionary but rather as a form of respect, expatriates find themselves unable to name their experience as discrimination, nor to raise it formally with HR as the “voice” factor mentioned by Hirschman (1970), since the surface of interaction remains consistently polite and civil.

This interpretive gap generates precisely the condition that Deitch et al. (2003) identify as attributional ambiguity. This is evident in P3’s continuous effort to anchor the conversation in English by actively raising questions and random thoughts during team interactions, in P5’s experience of having to defend his cultural background when differences arose during coffee break conversations, and most vividly in P6’s emotional progression from finding workplace stereotyping offensive, through rationalization, to eventual neglect (Farrell, 1983). Unable to attribute their sense of exclusion to any identifiable hostility, expatriates instead internalize it as a personal deficit in language proficiency or cultural adaptability. This dynamic reflects what Van Laer and Janssens (2011) describe as naturalization, a process through which subtle discriminatory patterns become so embedded in daily workplace life that they are no longer recognized as unusual, leaving expatriates navigating a form of marginalization that is structurally invisible, culturally legitimized and psychologically exhausting.

5.2 Adaptation as the Fifth Response to Peripheral Inclusion

Having established in the preceding subchapter how international professionals identify the gap between formal inclusion and genuine motivational belonging in Scandinavian workplaces, the question becomes how they respond to different situations. Hirschman's (1970) original model of exit, voice, and loyalty with Farrell's (1983) extended identification of neglect as the fourth response a member of an organization can have. Drawing from the analysis from the previous findings chapter, this study proposed adaptation as the fifth response which was based on and constructed from our participants' real-life experiences.

Unlike assigned expatriates who retain a home organization to return to, SIEs have invested significantly in their relocation without organizational support, the option of exit is extremely costly in financial, administrative and professional aspects (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Once SIEs commit to invest in time and effort and a secured job, the sunk cost suggests leaving the organization carries substantial costs for SIEs and constrain its availability as a practical response. The option of voice is similarly constrained through different mechanisms specific to the Scandinavian workplace context. One of the reasons is also voicing the concerns can be costly in a sense that possibly jeopardizes their careers. On the other hand, the egalitarian workplace culture as mentioned in subchapter 4.3 creates a social cost for raising concerns about exclusion, meaning complaining about being socially peripheral in a formally equal workplace risks appearing unprofessional or disruptive to the harmony in the workplace. Furthermore, the attributional ambiguity (Deitch et al., 2003; Dipboye & Johnson, 2004) described in subchapter 4.2.2 also suppresses voice by making subtle discrimination difficult to clearly identify. Therefore, voice is not a viable option to SIEs if they cannot even effectively advocate against what they cannot precisely articulate.

With exit costly and voice suppressed, the remaining responses are loyalty and neglect. Genuine loyalty in Hirschman's (1970) model requires the motivational conditions of recognition and belonging that formal DEI measures fail to produce as those measures stay at a hygiene level. Therefore, without these motivational conditions, genuine loyalty cannot be sustained. What the findings reveal instead more closely resembles Farrell's (1983) neglect which emphasizes a resigned continuation that lacks genuine commitment. Participants remained in their organizations not out of authentic attachment but because exit was costly and voice was structurally suppressed.

For instance, P2's description about her relationship with the organization is merely transactional and P5 and P6 are very withdrawn from their workplaces activities. These accounts share some features of neglect but are not fully captured. For example, the passenger metaphor by P2, the cultural preservation of P1 and the in-between identity position by P6.

With relevance to our findings with participants' real-life workplace experiences, this study proposes adaptation as the fifth response to organizational dissatisfaction that the existing framework by Hirschman (1970) and Farrell (1983) does not fully accommodate. Adaptation is defined here as the active and conscious management of peripheral positioning through the employee's behavioural strategies that sustain organizational members without challenging the conditions producing it. Adaptation is analytically distinct from all four existing responses. While loyalty and neglect each partially capture dimensions of what participants described during the interviews, neither accommodates the active, conscious and deliberate positioning. Rather than disengaging from the organization, participants who adapt actively and navigate their peripheral position while retaining themselves out of their personal goals and reasons being in Scandinavia.

The empirical findings for adaptation emerged across multiple participant accounts. As mentioned above, P2's conscious passenger orientation deliberately participates professionally while maintaining psychological distance from informal workplace social life. It demonstrates adaptation through the awareness of strategic distance while still putting effort to be included. P1's active cultural preservation consciously maintains cultural identity despite years of successful workplace adaptation. It represents adaptation through identity assertion. P6's account of him remaining peripherally located despite full cultural integration. It represents the ethnic visibility that drives him into the response of adaptation. Together these three forms of adaptation suggest SIEs managing rather than challenging their peripheral position. The implications of this dynamic for understanding peripheral inclusion as a sustained organizational condition in Scandinavian workplaces are examined in the synthesis that follows.

5.3 Synthesize Peripheral Inclusion in Scandinavian Workplaces

5.3.1 Physically In Culturally Out

According to the Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966), internal compliance policies and contractual safeguards form the foundational environment for maintaining employees. In the Scandinavian context of this study, international professionals generally undergo a process of high institutional alignment during the early stages of their entry into the Scandinavian workplace. By formally implementing an English-dominated workplace language policy, adopting a highly flat management structure, and establishing comprehensive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) regulations (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025), organizations have carved out a legitimate professional niche for expats both legally and physically. This comprehensive compliance within the formal dimension has indeed effectively eliminated the overt dissatisfaction experienced by foreign employees working in a foreign country.

However, this institutional alignment often creates an early illusion of full integration for both corporate managers and expatriates. Within the organization's daily formal agenda, international professionals are permitted and encouraged to participate equally in meetings and share their technical expertise, thereby fulfilling all core indicators of institutional inclusion as outlined in traditional management literature (Showry & Manasa, 2014). However, the depth of this inclusion remains confined to the instrumental and administrative levels of operation and does not automatically give rise to natural interpersonal bonds.

When the context of interaction shifts from formal meeting rooms to informal networks, expatriates are immediately exposed to a state of implicit social disconnection. Although local staff possess professional-level English proficiency, during everyday micro-interactions such as coffee breaks, the sharing of workplace humor, or informal emotional support, the absence of mandatory administrative constraints often leads local staff to unconsciously switch back to their native language, or to retreat into more closed or private conversations based on a shared cultural baseline. This phenomenon indicates that within the informal networks of an organization's day-to-day operations, motivators in the informal dimension (Herzberg, 1966), such as a deep sense of team belonging and socio-cultural identity, are chronically absent.

This cultural disengagement at the informal level leads to a unique form of ‘invisible isolation’ experienced by expatriate professionals within the organization. Although expatriates occupy the same physical space, they are unable to truly share the team’s social capital. Indeed, when encountering cultural barriers or gaps in humor, they face significant psychological attributional ambiguity. They find it difficult to voice open complaints to the company’s HR department, as local colleagues consistently maintain a high degree of politeness and civility. This mechanism of non-hostile distancing subtly pushes expatriates to the periphery of the social circle.

5.3.2 Egalitarian Paradox and Decoupling

Scandinavian societies have long been profoundly influenced by egalitarianism (Rydland et al., 2023), a cultural foundation that provides strong support for the implementation of DEI policies (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025) at the institutional level. However, the complexity of egalitarian cultural norms lies in the fact that, while they serve as a cultural virtue promoting fairness in formal settings, they often transform into invisible barriers that reinforce social divisions in informal contexts. Another deeply rooted core cultural norm in Scandinavian society is a high degree of respect for others’ personal space and boundaries. In everyday workplace interactions, this norm manifests itself in behavioral patterns such as avoiding causing inconvenience to others and refraining from actively interfering in their private affairs. This polite indifference, which locals perceive as well-intentioned, constitutes what is known as “Coconut Culture” (Meyer, 2015) in the context of cross-cultural interaction. It appears hard and impenetrable on the surface, and one must break through the “shell” to experience genuine human warmth.

This adherence to boundaries precisely leads local staff to adopt a passive, self-protective strategy in cross-cultural interactions with expats. As P8 mentioned in the interview before, in order to avoid potential embarrassment, such as due to their own limited English proficiency or to prevent expat colleagues with different cultural backgrounds from feeling awkward, or to maintain the local group’s own comfort zone, they often retreat into informal circles composed of locals. This process does not stem from a conscious desire to exclude others, but rather from an unconscious cultural habit. The result, however, is that the space for informal social interaction is effectively closed off to expats, making it difficult for them to break through this social barrier through spontaneous, everyday social behaviour.

Viewed through the lens of Herzberg's (1966) Two-Factor Theory, this dynamic reveals a core disconnect between Hygiene Factors and Motivators. At the formal institutional level, an egalitarian culture ensures the efficient implementation of organizational compliance, largely eliminating institutional dissatisfaction. However, the boundary culture in informal settings, which also stems from egalitarianism, unintentionally blocks the pathways to motivators such as a sense of belonging, social recognition and genuine interpersonal connections. These are exactly the conditions essential for international professionals to achieve true integration in the workplace. Consequently, the structural conditions for peripheral inclusion have taken root, where institutional acceptance and social exclusion coexist side by side, stemming from the same cultural baseline.

5.3.3 A Stable Peripheral State

The egalitarian paradox described above explains not only why peripheral inclusion exists in Scandinavian workplaces but also why, once established, it proves remarkably stable and resistant to change. Based on the findings, this study suggests that peripheral inclusion does not resolve itself, instead, it stabilizes. Rather than escalating into organizational disruption or the large-scale expatriate failure that early research on assigned expatriate predicted (Harzing & Christensen, 1995), peripheral inclusion settles into a sustained condition of professional presence. The result is a stable peripheral state that persists within the organizational equilibrium for self-initiated expatriates in Scandinavian workplaces.

The stability of this condition is partly sustained by the substantial hygiene-level benefits that Scandinavian workplaces provide. The characteristics of Scandinavian workplaces, including work-life balance, formally equal environment and flat organizational structure, collectively represents a set of benefits that international professionals are aware of. These hygiene-level conditions are sufficient to prevent exit even in the absence of motivational fulfillment. Participants remain not because they are genuinely satisfied with motivational-level conditions but because the formal organizational environment is good enough to make leaving feel unnecessary and costly. This is particularly significant for SIEs who have already invested a substantial amount of effort in their relocation without organizational help (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Therefore, the hygiene-level quality of Scandinavian workplaces functions to hold participants within the organization while the motivational dimensions of genuine remain out of reach.

As established in subchapter 5.2, adaptation as the dominant response further reinforces this stability which the SIEs attempt to manage rather than challenge their peripheral position. Adaptation does not merely reflect the stable peripheral state but actively produces and maintains it. SIEs adapt to their own workplace environment and demonstrate the varied and active character of this response in which the organizations receive no feedback that anything requires attention. Because participants adapt rather than voice or exit, organizations receive no signal that change is needed, so the conditions producing peripheral inclusion remain unaddressed. This is the key causal link between adaptation and stability.

The most analytically significant feature of the stable peripheral state is its invisibility to conventional organizational metrics. International professionals remain and work in their organizations, perform professionally and do not formally complain. As Guttormsen and colleagues (2018) observed in their reconceptualization of expatriate failure, organizations often have tangible metrics for evaluating technical performance. However, their study demonstrated that technical assignment success and profound experiential failure can coexist (Guttormsen et al., 2018). The stable peripheral state documented in this study represents precisely this coexistence representing organizational outcomes that appear successful while masking the motivational peripherality that international professionals quietly carry. Therefore, the stable peripheral state represents the combination of the identify from subchapter 5.1 and adaptation from subchapter 5.2 which peripheral inclusion moves when hygiene measures are adequate, adaptation is dominant but flexible and the motivational gap is accepted rather than challenged.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Research Contributions

Drawing on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis presented in the chapters before, the following section addresses each of the three research questions in turn, and then synthesizes the key contributions emerging from the data.

1. How do demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, language proficiency, and educational background interact with Scandinavian workplace cultural norms to shape the integration experiences of international professionals?

Supported by relevant literature and grounded in the specific analysis of interviews, it is evident that ethnic visibility constitutes a structural barrier that is difficult to overcome. Immigrants who have grown up in Scandinavia from an early age, even after achieving full cultural adaptation, may still find themselves pushed to the margins of workplace integration simply due to their ethnic appearance, let alone expatriates who arrive as adults. Although the participants generally hold local academic qualifications and demonstrate a good level of English proficiency, they still struggle to participate with ease in informal settings such as coffee break, while also facing the practical dilemma of whether to invest in learning the local language. This dilemma itself reflects a deeper gap between formal language policy and the reality of informal social life. Further compounded by the structural constraints of typical Scandinavian cultural norms, including the collective humility advocated by Janteloven (Gopal, 2004), an extreme respect for personal boundaries and the polite indifference that naturally follows, expatriates, unable to attribute this sense of coldness to any identifiable hostility, tend to internalize their social isolation as a personal disadvantage, whether in language ability or cultural adaptability. This process deepens their self-doubt and gives rise to the psychological condition known as attributional ambiguity (Deitch et al., 2003), making it increasingly difficult for them to find their way into the informal social core of the workplace.

2. How do locals and expats perceive and navigate the formal and informal dimensions of workplace inclusion within the Danish and Swedish workplace?

At the formal level, companies have put in place a range of institutional arrangements, such as designating English as the working language, adopting flat management structures and implementing DEI policies (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025), which effectively eliminate overt discrimination and provide expatriates with a legitimate and equal space for professional participation. However, the cognitive illusion that formal inclusion equates to genuine belonging leads organisations to mistakenly treat policy compliance as genuine social integration. At the informal and social level, when cultural differences are brought into the picture, local employees' structurally closed social tendencies, aligned with the "coconut culture" (Meyer, 2015), manifest in well-intentioned behaviours such as unconsciously maintaining strict personal boundaries and deliberately avoiding interactions that might cause others discomfort, but these very same gestures may be genuinely experienced by expatriates as workplace exclusion and social isolation. More critically, since this form of exclusion never presents itself through any overt hostility or identifiable discrimination, expatriates are left unable to clearly articulate, identify or even name what they are experiencing, and therefore find no viable path to raising their concerns through formal channels. This fundamental mismatch in perception and experience between the two groups ultimately forges a profound interpretive gap between local employees and expatriates, leaving the latter perpetually excluded from the affective core of the organisation.

3. What socio-cultural dynamics and organizational practices shape the career experiences of international professionals in Scandinavian workplaces?

Taken together, the uniquely complex egalitarian culture of Scandinavian societies, while supporting the effective implementation of DEI policies (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025) at the formal institutional level, transforms in informal settings into a hidden mechanism of exclusion rooted in an extreme respect for personal boundaries. Combined with a workplace culture that remains confined to institutional inclusion, a local social culture that is relatively closed and difficult to penetrate much like the shell of a coconut, and the contradictory workplace identity that expatriates themselves inhabit, being physically present yet culturally outside, these dynamics collectively push expatriates into a distinctive and stable peripheral state, which is professionally present yet emotionally absent, institutionally accepted yet relationally excluded.

Building on the findings discussed above, this study also makes three interconnected theoretical contributions to the existing literature on expatriate experience, workplace inclusion and cross-

cultural management.

Firstly, this study specifies peripheral inclusion within the context of Scandinavian workplace culture, which systematically describes the distinctive condition in which expatriates find themselves institutionally accepted yet relationally excluded. Therefore, it fills a gap in the existing expatriate related literature where this hidden phenomenon of workplace integration and inclusion has lacked adequate conceptualization. This conceptual refinement not only provides a more precise framework for understanding international professionals' workplace struggles, but also reveals that physical presence and emotional absence can stably coexist over time, rather than inevitably resolving into either full integration or exit.

Secondly, this study proposes adaptation as a fifth organizational response within the EVLN framework, going beyond the four established categories of exit, voice, and loyalty from Hirschman (1970) and neglect from Farrell (1983). Grounded in the lived experiences of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), adaptation is defined here as an active and conscious strategy for managing one's peripheral position. Unlike the passive resignation associated with neglect, adaptation reflects a deliberate choice to maintain a strategic distance from the organisation while preserving one's personal goals and sense of identity, which extends the explanatory boundaries of the EVLN framework at the theoretical level.

Thirdly, this study uncovers the inherent paradox within Scandinavian egalitarian culture. It demonstrates how the same cultural foundation that supports the effective implementation of formal DEI policies (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025) can transform into an unintentional mechanism of hidden exclusion in informal settings. This offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding the dual role that cultural norms play in shaping inclusion policies within Scandinavian workplace. It suggests that the influence of cultural norms on inclusion is not simply one of promotion or obstruction, but may operate in opposite directions across different contextual levels, which carries meaningful implications for future cross-cultural DEI research and policy design.

6.2 Research Limitations

This subchapter presents the main limitations encountered in this study. First is the geographic scope. This study examined Scandinavian workplaces as a broadly unified cultural context, emphasizing the similarities between Danish and Swedish workplace culture without fully accounting for the differences that exist between them.

With that being said, while we tried to have more participants participating in the interviews, due to logistical and time constraints, we managed to have 8 participants for our data collection. While the findings were rich and inspiring, a large sample would have strengthened the analytical depth and theoretical saturation of the findings. Additionally, as shown in Table 1., the number of participants are still relatively balanced in terms of their current residing country, however, the participants residing in Sweden are more newcomer international professionals while participants residing in Denmark are more long-term residents or even locals. Therefore, a more deliberately balanced participant composition across countries, time residing here and professional backgrounds would have strengthened the comparative dimensions of the analysis.

Furthermore, theoretical sampling is one of the key components of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. In order to ensure the number of participants for data collection, convenience sampling to mitigate this limitation. To pivot the problem, we have rearranged and rescheduled the interviews to fulfil the academic rigor of grounded theory.

Last but not least, as international students navigate Scandinavian organizational contexts themselves, the researchers' own experiences may have shaped their analytical sensitivities.

6.3 Future Research

The limitations identified in the preceding section point toward several productive directions for future research.

First, a more comprehensive and comparative study of peripheral inclusion in Scandinavian workplace culture. Norway was not included in the data collection phase of the present study as mentioned. Therefore, it can be valuable to conduct interviews with international professionals

residing in Norway and together, it illustrates a comparative study within this region which showcases both similarities and differences.

Second, a quantitative study follow-up through a survey study examining the related topics of this study. Some of the questions in our interviews were plain and straightforward which can be achieved through a large scale quantitative questionnaire to test the pattern of peripheral inclusion or self-initiated expatriates in Scandinavian countries.

Finally, an employer perspective can be beneficial for understanding the topics of self-initiated expatriate integration. Involving Scandinavian managers and HR professionals for an in-depth interview would provide insight into how they perceive and respond to the informal exclusion dynamics of the study.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Openings & Greetings

1. Can you introduce yourself (including working experience here, demographic information, language level, educational background, etc)
2. Are you happy and satisfied at work?
3. Being a First-timer Working in Scandinavia
4. What was your first impression of the office culture here compared to what you were used to?
5. Was there anything about the way people work here that surprised you?
6. Is there anything about how you work or communicate that you've consciously adjusted since being here?

Social Aspects at Workplace

1. Do you feel like you can truly relax and join in, or does it feel like you're still “on duty” during coffee break or social events at your workplace?
2. Even if the office language is English, what happens when people are just chatting? Do you ever feel like the “vibe” changes when the local language comes out?
3. Do you feel that the real bonding happens at the desk, or is it mostly at after-work drinks and private events?
4. Can you tell me about a colleague here you feel genuinely close to? How did that relationship develop?
5. Do you usually hang out with your colleagues? Or is there a boundary between certain social bubbles?
6. How would you describe your relationships with your colleagues here?
7. What has your experience of connecting with colleagues been like here? Both the easy parts and the more challenging parts

Subtle Moments at Workplace

1. Is there a moment when you feel like having a second guess in the workplace?

2. Do you ever feel like people see you as “the [Your Nationality] guy/girl” first, and your professional skills second?
3. Do you get the jokes at work? Can humor bring all colleagues together?

Thoughts on Scandinavian Egalitarian Values

1. How do you feel about the Scandinavian flat workplace culture?
2. When the company talks about diversity, does it feel real to you, or just like something they put on a website to look good?
3. Do you think it's the company who pushes the efforts or among colleagues, everyone just gets along?

Final Reflections

1. If you had to describe your relationship with this workplace using a metaphor, what would it be and why? For example, a guest, a resident or a visitor, etc.
2. Any suggestions for international graduates in their future workplace if they want to work in Scandinavia?