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'Culture' in Finnish migrant-background youth's discourses constructing togetherness and distance

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ABSTRACT

'Culture' as a construct has a complex role in the position of youth with migration background in Europe. It has been used to stereotyping and othering them, but recognising diverse cultural heritages positively affirms their identities. However, migrant-background youth's discourses concerning culture have not sufficiently been investigated. Based on two interview datasets, we analyse how youth with migration background construct their identities and negotiate togetherness with and distance from others through the concept of culture. The discourse analysis paid attention to the linguistic, discursive and social practices. As a linguistic practice, the participants talked about separate 'cultures' when describing similarity with other youth with migration background and distance between them and the 'Finns'. As a discursive practice, 'cultures' were defined as shared norms or communication styles but also similar mindsets. The accounts of intercultural learning brought up the significance of culture in validating migrant-background youth's identity. As a social practice, the notion of culture constructed 'Finns' and 'foreigners' as distinctive groups with certain power imbalance. Schools should deliberately deconstruct the essentialising notion of culture to help youth with migration background find more nuanced explanations to their experiences of togetherness or distance, question the power imbalances and cross inter-group barriers.

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Culture; migrant-background youth; belonging; identity; critical consciousness; intercultural learning

Introduction

In Finland, like in many other open societies in Europe, there is a concern for the inclusion of youth with a migration background, or adolescents who have experienced either forced or voluntary migration themselves, or who have family histories with migration that play an active role in how they position themselves in and are positioned by their host society – typically, youth whose parent or parents are migrants. In this article, we refer to these adolescents as youth with a migration background, or migrant-background youth, while also referring to other adjacent terms when they appear in reference literature. In Finland, there are state-level goals for the integration of migrant-background individuals, particularly through education and employment (Koikkalainen 2022). However, the legal responsibility for migrant integration has been slowly shifting from the state to municipalities, which has resulted in uneven and varied local policies and practices (Mutanen and Kettunen 2025). In addition, there is no consensus on what 'integration' means, although research considers it a long-term process involving identity and emotion (Kivisto

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2015). In Finland, integration is often seen as a labour market issue rather than a social or cultural issue (Koikkalainen 2022), which means the integrative, identity-related needs of migrant-background youth not yet in employment may remain overlooked.

Even after migrant-background youth have integrated structurally and to some extent culturally and interactively into society, they remain in the process of identificative integration (Saarinen and Zacheus 2019). That is, youth may have learned the dominant language of the new homeland and learned to operate according to its unwritten rules, but do not feel like full-fledged members of society or feel like they belong, which results in perpetual outsider feelings (Saarinen and Zacheus 2019). This further highlights emotional and psychological integration (Kivisto 2015). Recent studies have observed that migrant-background youth often identify as ‘immigrants’ with a complicated relationship with ‘Finnishness’ (Mustonen and Puranen 2021; Oikarinen-Jabai 2017) and differences in their sense of belonging. For example, youth with a later age of arrival, especially students from Russia and Estonia, experience a weaker sense of belonging to their schools compared to Somali students (Alisaari and Kilpi-Jakonen 2022).

In this study, we focus on migrant-background youth’s discourses around togetherness with and distance from the dominant society. We fully recognise that grouping people by migration background is problematic (for discussion, see Gerritsen and Maier 2012). Thus, rather than focusing on the youth’s migrant identity directly, we examine their discourses around togetherness with and distance from the dominant society by focusing on the construct of ‘culture’¹ which our interviewees repeatedly used when asked about their sense of belonging in their schools and neighbourhoods. By togetherness we refer to an emotional connection that is related to but different from the sense of belonging that refers to finding one’s own place in a group (Boldermo 2020). Furthermore, togetherness and distance seemed to form a continuum along which the participants operated when talking about culture.

There is a body of research that examines the perceptions, awareness, and discourses of cultural differences of professionals working with migrants. For instance, Finnish teachers working in culturally diverse contexts both highlight and downplay cultural diversity (Kimanen 2018). Sometimes they, like Nordic professionals working with immigrants (e.g. Kimanen et al. 2022; Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2019), culturalise migrant-background people, i.e. use culture as a simplifying and othering explanation. Indeed, Dervin and Keihäs (2013) have called for a ‘new interculturality’ that critically reviews discourses and representations concerning cultures. Further, Essed and Trienekens (2008, 54) have written about ‘the obsession with cultural difference’ in many European countries, referring to the tendency to avoid talking about race and attributing all inequalities to culture or ethnicity.

However, the voices of youth with a migration background have seldom been considered. An exception comes from Hong Kong (Gu, Mak, and Qu 2017), where youth were observed to construct essentialised cultural differences between their heritage culture and the mainstream Chinese culture, which may hinder the youth’s integration into the mainstream community, but we aim to shed more light on this perspective. What exactly in the construct of culture creates the distance that hinders the feeling of belongingness to society for migrant-background youth? What are the positive connotations of culture that create a sense of belonging and togetherness? To address this gap in research, we use two interview datasets to analyse how Finnish migrant-background youth talk about culture when discussing belonging and diversity.

Literature review

The importance of positive cultural identification

Research has identified many benefits for an individual to identify with a certain culture. Receiving validation for one’s minority identity is vital for young people’s well-being and positive development (Ghavami et al. 2011; Wakefield and Hudley 2007). In particular, strong ethnic identification

can promote socio-cultural openness and positive self-concept (Lauglo 2017). It may also protect mental health by reducing depressive symptoms and buffering against discrimination-related stress (Mossakowski 2003). Families play an important role in migrant-background children and adolescents' identity formation, especially through home language use and participation in cultural events and organisations (Lee 2013; Mesinas and Perez 2016). In the Finnish context, it has been found that perceived discrimination negatively affects immigrant-background students' school adjustment, while perceived parental support has a positive impact (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Solheim 2004). There is also research that highlights the significance of experiencing one's cultural identity being recognised and represented in schools and their curricula (Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995, 2014; Nieto 1992).

On the other hand, research also points out the risks of othering and constructing hierarchies that may result from emphasising cultural differences (Jensen 2011; Udah and Singh 2019). The Finnish curriculum for basic education seeks to avoid these kinds of unfavourable approaches by considering all students culturally diverse (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). However, it does not contain explicit transformative goals to eliminate inequalities or deconstruct whiteness (Zilliacus, Holm, and Sahlström 2017). Furthermore, ethnographic research has shown Finnish teachers' tendency to exclude the cultural Other in their definitions of normality (Juva 2019; Riitaaja 2013; see also Kimanen 2018).

Ultimately, positive cultural identification could support the development of critical consciousness, or the ability to critically examine inequitable social conditions and act to change them (Freire 1973). Scholars have argued that adolescence is a crucial period particularly for the development of racial and ethnic identities within the broader cultural identity (Maker Castro, Wray-Lake, and Cohen 2022), as youth explore belonging to a minority, construct politicised ethnic and racial identities, and use these to engage in critical action against oppressive structures (Mathews et al. 2020). In particular, critical reflection, or the 'awareness and analysis of inequitable social conditions' (Rapa and Geldhof 2020, section 1) and critical motivation, or 'a commitment to creating positive social change that results in more equitable and just systems and outcomes' (Rapa and Geldhof 2020, section 1) – have been linked with increased well-being in youth from diverse backgrounds (Maker Castro, Wray-Lake, and Cohen 2022).

'Culture' as a discursive construct

As common as the concept of 'culture' is in everyday discourses, there is scant research on adolescents' own use of the concept in constructing distance from or togetherness with the dominant society, and most has examined the construct as used by different ethnicities rather than migrant histories. Some of this research focuses on the perspectives of majority ethnic youth. Svensson and Syed (2023) found that some Swedish majority ethnic youth positioned culture as a dimension of diversity, something the 'others' have. Peltola and Phoenix (2022) observed that Finnish majority ethnic youth lacked vocabulary to discuss cultural diversity in their schools. In many cases, majority ethnic youth constructed white Finnishness as the norm, sometimes through a color-blind approach (Peltola and Phoenix 2022).

Research conducted among those identifying as minority ethnic youth paints a more complex picture of the discursive use of 'culture'. Gu and colleagues (2017) found that minority ethnic students in Hong Kong tended to construct an essentialised cultural difference between their heritage and host cultures. In addition, some parents may attempt to create essentialising boundaries between cultures, as well as positioning their home culture as the desirable variety as compared to other migrants of the same origin (Schechter and Bayley 1997). Conversely, Peltola and Phoenix (2022) found that minority ethnic youth could position themselves as insiders, for example through defining 'multiculturalism' in a way that included diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, or framing it in positive terms. Furthermore, Luoma and Peltola (2024) noted that although students in an ethnically diverse lower secondary school constructed only weak boundaries between diverse students

in general, categories such as ‘non-Finnish’, ‘foreigner’, and ‘culture’ were used in explaining a lack of sense of community.

Haikkola’s (2011) study found that Finnish youth with a migration background labelled themselves as ‘foreigners’, distancing themselves from the culturally inferior label of ‘immigrant’ but also from ‘Finnishness’, maybe due to perceived barriers around that category. Furthermore, among fellow ‘foreigners’, cultural or ethnic boundaries did not play a significant role. In Pauha’s (2018) study concerning Muslim youth in Finland, Finnishness and Islam were often viewed as distinct and sometimes even opposing or mutually exclusive concepts: Finnishness was typically linked with Christianity, alcohol use, and light skin or blue eyes. Nevertheless, identifying oneself as Finnish or non-Finnish was not a fixed trait but could change depending on the context.

Culture and cultural similarity have also been observed in the discourses of adult migrants in Finland. They tend to construct cultural proximity to Finnishness as a significant contributor to integration but also a protector from discrimination (Bontenbal 2023). In Varjonen and colleagues’ (2018) study, Estonian- and Russian-speaking adult migrants in Finland favoured a discourse pattern that required conforming to the mainstream culture whereas Somali-speaking migrants challenged this pattern and emphasised minority rights. From another perspective, maintaining the heritage culture seems to be a way for immigrant-background youth to show their indebtedness to their parents, and any flexibility may be interpreted as abandoning the culture (Turjanmaa and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2020).

In this article, the research question is as follows: *How do youth with migration background construct their identities and negotiate togetherness with and distance from others through the concept of culture?* We will also discuss how pedagogical approaches at school could impact ethnic minority youth’s discourses of culture and hence their positioning in society.

Theoretical framework

Defining culture

We have chosen to use the concept of ‘culture’ in this study because of its prevalence in the discourses of the participants. However, we are fully aware that the concept has been used to perpetuate static, stereotypical notions that serve to essentialise and marginalise groups already minoritised in society while reinforcing the normativity of dominant groups (Rissanen, Kuusisto, and McMullen 2023; Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). In addition, it is important to avoid the notion that identifying with just one – often the dominant – culture in a society is the norm (Zilliacus, Holm, and Sahlström 2017). Uncritically engaging in discourses about ‘cultural differences’ can also lead to ‘new racism’ where clear-cut and often negative attitudes and hierarchies are constructed (May 1999, 12).

In this study, we conceptualise ‘culture’ as self-constructed boundaries between groups based on differences and similarities that are not objective but rather deemed important by individuals. As Gabbert (2006) has explained, the ‘significance of certain cultural traits’ to an individual depends on ‘a complex process of interpretation and evaluation by the actors, shaped by social, political, economic, and historical factors’ (89). These components of cultural identity include but are not limited to profession, social class, education, nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, and ability (Jameson 2007). Ethnic and racial identity are among the most studied (Worrell 2024), although they are interwoven with other dimensions of identity in ways typically described as intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 2020; McCall 2005).

We also recognise that identity is dynamic and involves such processes as exploration, self-categorisation, and attachment (Phinney and Ong 2007), perhaps better represented as the verb ‘identification’. To preserve the complexities of cultural identification, some scholars prefer to analyse it as a discursive practice (Dervin 2015; Dervin and Keihäs 2013). Bamberg and colleagues (2011) note that studying identification as a discursive practice allows viewing identity ‘as negotiated among speaking

subjects in social contexts, and as emerging in the form of subjectivity and a sense of self (177). This allows identity to be studied as a process where an individual agentively negotiates their place in the world, finds sameness and difference between themselves and others, and experiences change while maintaining a sense of self (Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin 2011).

Cultural identification and education

Recognising that for adolescents, school is an important social setting for self-exploration and identity construction (Howarth 2002; Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma 2006), we are also interested in the ways education might promote positive cultural identification in youth through social justice oriented pedagogical frameworks, which involve culturally responsive, sensitive, or sustaining teaching, and supporting especially minoritised students' learning and feeling of belongingness (e.g. Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995, 2014; Paris 2012). Culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogy recognises and values students' diverse cultural backgrounds to provide inclusive learning environments and better learning outcomes (Gay 2002). It involves adapting instruction to meet diverse needs, building positive relationships (Ladson-Billings 2021), and maintaining linguistic and cultural pluralism in education (Paris 2012). However, the implementation of such pedagogies is challenging, given that teachers, curricula, and school as a social system tend to represent the dominant society through majority race, ethnicity, religion, or language, thus reifying and reproducing dominant perspectives (Bourdieu 1986; Gist et al. 2019; Küçükcan 2003; Leonardo 2009; Mourad 2022).

Paulo Freire's (1973) 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' highlights the need to challenge oppressive structures and promote liberation through education (Trifonas 2018). It emphasises dialogue and active participation of the oppressed, aiming to transform them into active subjects capable of critical thinking (Freire 1973). One of the aspects of the Freirean pedagogy is critical consciousness, which aims to increase students' understanding of structural oppression (Freire 1973) and ability to engage in efforts to address and change societal inequalities (Freire 1973; Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011). Education should foster genuine dialogue and relationships free from colonial or oppressive influences (Freire 1973). Further, Henry Giroux's (1985) critical pedagogy aims to create citizen activists aware of structural oppression; it questions existing power relations in society and schools and uncovers forms of subordination and social injustice. The aim is to make visible the processes whereby students' cultural capital is devalued and how they are structurally silenced at school and beyond (Giroux 1985).

Methodology

We used two datasets (Table 1), created in two separate sub-projects of a study concerning two contexts for migrant-background youth's inclusion and civic engagement, a school and a local neighbourhood. Dataset A involved interviews exploring social and civic engagement with 27 adolescents (ages 15–19) with Asian, African, and European family backgrounds from a diverse neighbourhood

Table 1. The two datasets.

	Dataset A	Dataset B
Type of interview	Individual, pair or group (max. 4) interviews	Group interviews of 4–5 young people
Context	School, leisure activities	School
Topic	Social and civic engagement	Sense of belonging at school
Age of participants	15–19	14–16
Backgrounds of participants	European, African, Asian	Finnish, European, Asian
Number of interviews / participants initially	17 / 27	8 / 36
Number of interviews / participants in the included data	12 / 19	7 / 32

in Finland. Participants were recruited through school and leisure activities. Interviews were conducted in English, Finnish, or Farsi, and as individual, pair or group interviews, based on the youth's preferences.² The involvement of a researcher from an Asian background enabled the inclusion of Farsi-speaking participants, and data were translated by the researcher from Farsi to English for analysis. Twelve of the 17 interviews included examples where culture was either explicitly or implicitly used to create togetherness or distance (see below). Dataset B entailed interviews of 36 youths on the sense of belonging at school in the same neighbourhood, involving 8 group interviews of 4–5 participants (ages 14–16) from Asian, African and European backgrounds.³ White, ethnically Finnish students were a minority in the school and in the interviews. Among these 11 group interviews, 7 included instances where culture was used to create togetherness or distance. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis and any interview excerpts in Finnish or Farsi were translated into English by the authors.

Our research design did not contain characteristics that would make ethical review statement necessary according to the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity TENK (2019) guidelines. We obtained informed consent from all participants. According to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019), parental consent is needed for participants under 15. However, in alignment with the school's policy, parental consent was received from all participants in dataset B. In dataset A, the parents of participants under 18 (but above 15) were informed about the research by giving the participants multilingual leaflets to take home and by spreading information on the project in the neighbourhood. Below, when presenting the interview excerpts, the included interviews have been renumbered starting from 1, the letters A and B referring to the datasets. The interviewees have also been given running numbers.

We employ discourse analysis following Fairclough (2001) and Wijzen (2013). According to this approach, language is a social practice that individuals use to position themselves but that simultaneously positions them. What participants say in interviews reveals what kind of linguistic and discursive resources, for instance metaphors or definitions, they can access. Moreover, it shows how they both actively use those resources and become defined by them. The analysis suggested by Fairclough (2001) includes three stages: description, interpretation and explanation. Description entails analysis of linguistic practices, namely vocabulary, grammar and expressions. Interpretation focuses on discursive practices, referring to representations of activities, subjects and their relationships. Explanation attends to social practices, i.e. how the participants position themselves and are positioned by the linguistic and discursive practices they use.

In the first phase of the analysis, the first author identified excerpts where the interviewees explicitly mentioned the word 'culture' or 'cultural'. In dataset A, there were also instances where the interviewees talked very similarly about the differences between the 'Finns' and the 'foreigners', often identifying themselves as the latter; those excerpts were also included in the analysis as implicit references to culture. After an initial categorisation by the first author, all authors discussed the preliminary findings and agreed that the key social practice was constructing togetherness or distance. This led to the final exclusion of certain interviews, explained above, and generation of three analytical categories: (1) culture used to construct togetherness (2) culture used to construct distance, (3) intercultural learning constructed as significant in reducing distance or creating togetherness. In the following, example excerpts under all these categories will be analysed in detail, focusing on different linguistic, discursive and social practices.

Results

Culture constructing togetherness

Culture was used to construct togetherness in two ways, highlighting cultural diversity and cultural similarity. This contradiction was possible because cultural diversity was typically constructed as something the participants had in common with their migrant-background peers:

B24 [In this school] there's like a lot of people from different countries, different cultures, different cultural backgrounds so we are all like different here. None of us are like connected by like similar stuff so that's why I'd say that we're presenting to each other our culture, our things that we do. So that's what I would say.

B25: I agree. I think it's like you can be who you want and like and no matter it doesn't matter what religion or culture you're from 'cause do what you want.

B26: Yeah you can be just whoever you want without people judging you all the time. (Interview B6)

A discursive practice that is notable here is that the interviewees define their school as hyper-diverse ('none of us are connected by similar stuff') where a hyper-pluralism, absence of any dominant cultural practices, provides ultimate freedom of expression for students. Instead of referring to (at least not confined to) an idea that students in this school express ultimate individualism, they resort to an essentialist notion of cultures (being 'from different cultures') where one's cultural background is an essential part of one's disposition. It is highlighted that being culturally 'different' in this context implies being normal, hence 'different' individuals are not 'judged'. The power relations are thus constructed as special. Using these discursive practices, the participants adopt a position as 'different' but not 'the Other' in these special circumstances.

The following is an example of a discourse of cultural similarity:

B10: Albanians are together more than others.

B11: Yeah. So that is which culture you belong to. [-]

Researcher: You mentioned like other Albanians want to hang out with other Albanians. You are all from Albania. Why do you think that is?

B12: He is Kurdish. Not Albanian.

B11: He has the same culture, the same humor. (Interview B3)

A linguistic practice that can be noted here is that B11 talks about belonging to a culture, implying that culture is more a question of being rather than doing. In terms of discursive practices, the interviewees construct similar culture as something that makes people enjoy each other's company and entailing aspects like a shared sense of humour. As a social practice, this approach enables them to construct togetherness between the 'Albanians' and the 'Kurdish'.

The following provides a special case where certain Finns are constructed as similar with the interviewee:

A13: Because Finns here are our really good friends. And here everybody is the same. And here nobody gets angry if a Finn calls us immigrants, we always take it as a joke. (Interview A8)

As a linguistic practice, 'Finns' are depicted as opposed to 'us'. This resource positions the participants socially as non-Finns. However, the excerpt describes the special circumstances where this distance is reduced. 'Here' refers to the culturally diverse neighbourhood where the interviewees lived, went to school or engaged in hobbies. The interviewee constructs togetherness between 'Finns' and 'us' by stating 'everybody is the same'. What this discursive practice refers to, is not explicated, but the next sentence reveals that it leads to a reduction in the power relation between 'Finns' and 'non-Finns'. Calling somebody 'immigrant' can be taken as a joke, although in other contexts it would be an insult, a category inferior to 'foreigner' (see also Haikkola 2011). The participants thus position themselves as peers to 'Finns' in their own neighbourhood, but the power relations of the wider society are clearly visible.

In the migrant-background youth's discourses, 'culture' seems to play a role in explaining why they feel at home in a culturally diverse neighbourhood, either in relation to other migrant-background youth or the 'Finns' in the neighbourhood. In these accounts, 'culture' is not explicitly defined, but seems to include similar mindsets and used almost interchangeably with 'same'. Equality is also strongly present in the accounts of being 'the same' and sharing 'the culture'. From

another perspective, the young interviewees often talk about culture in a culturalising way, constructing cultures as fixed entities detached from each other.

Culture constructing distance

As a counterpart to the excerpts emphasising similarity of culture and togetherness, discourses of cultural distance typically contrasted the interviewees' own culture with the culture 'Finns' have. In some cases, the interviewees simply stated 'Finns' have a different culture, but in some cases the accounts specify those differences:

A1: As you may know, Finnish parents require their children to go out every day, but my parents requested that I stay at home. When my friends invited me to go shopping or hang out after school, I couldn't go. They could dye their hair, I couldn't because my parents wouldn't let me. Then I felt like an outcast, unable to spend time with my friends. But now I'm glad I have my own culture and I accept it. (Interview A1)

As a linguistic practice, the participant talks about the 'Finnish' as people outside her family. In terms of discursive practice, culture is defined as norms and a social order. In the beginning of the excerpt the participant describes how differences in these positioned her as an outsider, somebody who cannot participate in the mainstream lifestyle. However, the concept of culture is introduced in the end to resolve the tension. It enables the participant to position herself as a happy outsider, lucky enough to have a culture of her own although it means certain restrictions. This excerpt implies that the discursive practice of defining culture as a positive distinction from the 'Finnish' is used in some participants' homes.

Some compared Finnish communication styles:

A5: Yeah, in my view it [the culturally diverse population of the neighborhood] makes it much more fun, like the environment. And from my point of view Finns talk quite little, or talk at school. Some people at the [sports] trainings have been pretty cold like they are really cold inside. So foreigners are a bit like its opposite. (Interview A4)

A6: Because, we have noticed like, or well, people say that Finns are like stingy people, kind of, you know, that's why. But, I don't know, Finns [of the neighborhood] are a bit different people. They aren't so much stiff people like elsewhere. (Interview A5)

As a linguistic practice, in interview A4, the term 'foreigner' is used to label those who are not 'Finns'. Here, again, the neighbourhood is constructed as a special place. In interview A4, the description of the social environment consisting of mainly 'foreigners' as a vivid place, as an 'opposite' to how 'Finns' behave, defines communication styles as a main difference between 'foreigners' and 'Finns'. In interview A5, the discursive practice defining 'Finns' of the local community being more similar to the participant than 'Finns' elsewhere is repeated. In both excerpts, 'Finns' in general are described as stiff, silent, non-generous and sparse in showing emotions. The account is based on essentialist notion of culture, as the 'Finns' of the neighbourhood are constructed as deviant from the norm and the discourse is based on how people are and not on how the circumstances or relationships are. The participant in interview A4 positions himself as a positive opposite to the 'Finns', and the participant in interview A5 as somebody who knows different sides of 'Finns', and both position themselves as insiders in their culturally diverse context.

In the following, culture seems to have clear connections to power relations.

A2: I feel better when I'm with foreigners. The Finns are a bit different from us because Finland is their own country. (Interview A2)

Here, again, the terms 'foreigner' and 'Finn' are used. In terms of discursive practices, 'Finns' are described as essentially 'different'. Consequently, all 'foreigners' are constructed as similar with each other as opposed to 'Finns', so the function of this discourse seems to be to explain distance in relation to 'Finns', possibly the power relation where 'foreigners' are at a disadvantage. The

account that ‘Finland is their own country’ constructs a very clear power imbalance: Finland belongs to ‘Finns’ and not to the interviewee or people like her.

An especially revealing excerpt on the distance between the participant and ‘Finns’ is the following, an account given as a response to a question concerning the benefit of knowing the right people:

A14: Well at school I know quite many, so like with the help of them, like this Halloween they asked me like out and so. Like, although I do not see them a lot, I only meet them at school. So, they asked me otherwise outside the school hours, like yeah, come on, like there is kind of a party [-]. So that’s been like nice, and right away when I have been there, I have not been treated as an outsider although the largest part [of people] there was, well, Finns. Then they still treated me kind of like they had been foreigners. I mean they treated me ok. So in my view it was nice to experience. Something new. [-] We went there and then there was a Finn [laughing] with immigrant clothes on, on Halloween, so in my opinion it was really nice to see, that ...

R: [laughs] What are immigrant clothes?

A14: Well generally that kind of Arabia [shows his head] ... You know what I’m talking about. So that kind of [laughs]. So it was fun. (Interview A9)

The account contains several events that are presented as pleasant surprises. The first surprise was that schoolmates, either ‘Finns’ themselves or people who knew the ‘Finns’ who had organised the Halloween party, invited the interviewee. Second was that the ‘Finns’ at the party did not treat him as an outsider. Here the interviewee explicitly resorts to the discourse that foreigners normally treat him well, and here the ‘Finns’ adopted the same behaviour. The final and the most pleasant surprise was that one ‘Finn’ at the party wore Arab clothing, presumably a *gutrah* or similar headdress. Being not of Arab origin himself, the interviewee did not present wearing a foreign culture’s headwear at a dress-up party as an insult or cultural appropriation but probably as a token of a non-expected positive attitude toward non-Finnish traditions. The wordings also reveal the distinction: the headdress is referred to as ‘immigrant’ clothing, using the denigrating term, distinctive of ‘foreigner’ (see Haikkola 2011). The power relations are obvious in this account: the ‘Finns’ are constructed as having the power to exclude or include and to define what aspects of ‘immigrant’ culture are included in having fun with peers and how. Simultaneously, the distance between ‘Finns’ and ‘foreigners’ is highlighted: both similar habits and welcoming behaviour are represented as surprises, exceptions to the norm.

When culture or difference were used to construct distance, it was always between ‘us’ and ‘Finns’. One’s own culture was often described as a positive but clearly distinctive set of norms and behaviours compared to the ‘Finnish’ habits. The ways the youth with a migration background used culture and difference to construct distance also revealed power relations where the participants were not positioned as critically conscious.

Intercultural learning increasing togetherness

There were also some instances where intercultural learning was constructed as a source of togetherness. It could entail learning about one’s own culture, learning between diverse cultures, and intercultural learning with ‘Finns’.

In the following, the participant talks about learning at the mosque:

A10: It’s pretty fun like learning like your own history, cause like, you don’t learn anywhere else basically so like going there, the culture, the history, it’s pretty interesting. (Interview A6)

The education at the mosque is defined as something specific in that it is only provided there and that it is especially interesting. This account can be compared to the earlier excerpt where participant A1 narrated a trajectory that led to accepting her own culture that differed from the dominant, ‘Finnish’ culture. Participant A6 positions himself as a lucky person with a culture and history of his own. This instance can be regarded as intercultural learning as it occurs in a diaspora setting where a young person with minoritised background needs to find out details about their cultural heritage to make sense of their position against the culture of the dominant society beyond the stereotypes.

The specific culturally diverse setting was sometimes constructed as an opportunity for intercultural learning. The following excerpt describes a ‘Day of Cultures’ at school:

A17: I think it was like a really fun day. I think it was one of the best days of last year, last school year. It was really great for us, a way for us to get to know the different cultures and like yeah just get information on other cultures. And we get to like wear clothes, like traditional dresses, and it was also really fun to see like people wearing like different cultural clothes and yeah. (Interview A11)

This type of theme day where students can display their cultures has sometimes been criticised as a ‘lazy’ approach to multiculturalism that only concentrates on outward aspects of culture (Watkins and Noble 2019, p. 295). However, the participant described the day as extremely meaningful, a unique opportunity to learn about each other’s cultures. The definition of culture is again essentialising, even exoticising. However, the ‘Day of Cultures’ is constructed as bringing cultural diversity into the spotlight, which seems to enable the culturally ‘diverse’ students to position themselves as having something important to teach others.

Some participants, however, narrated opportunities to learn about each other’s ‘cultures’ during informal interaction:

A11: It is really like, we said [earlier], we have been [with] other cultures, it’s also interesting to hear from others the culture and to know what they have. So everybody learns while we are hanging around and so. (Interview A7)

This excerpt repeats an essentialising definition of cultures as the participant describes being with ‘other cultures’ instead of people, and the peers describing ‘the culture’ instead of diverse cultural practices. ‘What they have’ seems to refer to significant habits, maybe feasts or foods, that are being compared among peers. Here the learning is again constructed as a meaningful experience, and culturally diverse peers are positioned as having valuable information.

One interviewee mentioned the benefits of learning about ‘Finnish’ culture:

A2: On the other hand, if you have more Finnish friends, you will be more familiar with Finnish culture and food, and you will feel more at home. (Interview A2)

Intercultural learning is described as taking place among peers, like in the excerpt above, and resulting in feeling at home. Compared to the accounts of feeling at home in similarity or hyper-diversity, here the distance to the ‘Finnish’ culture is constructed as something that can be overcome. Hence, the interviewee positions herself as capable of closing the gap between ‘Finns’ and herself, but this was the only explicit account of this type.

It was more common to narrate about intercultural learning processes of the ‘Finns’ in the neighbourhood:

A14: And then even those Finns who all have like grown up together [with non-native Finns] in the same class [at school] like I grew up with [name]. [-] Then I never experienced anything racist from his side. He kind of knows where I came from and where I grew up and where I have been born and the like. So they kind of learn when they grow up into others’ culture. (Interview A9)

The learning process is highlighted here, and intercultural learning is constructed as a result of growing up together. The participant even says ‘Finns’ in the targeted neighbourhood grow up ‘into others’ culture’. This expression uses an essentialist notion of culture that constructs distance between two cultures and hence requires that somebody who shares the togetherness shares the culture. The power relation is again highlighted: instead of non-discriminatory attitudes or awareness, shared history and intercultural learning are constructed as requirements for non-racist behaviour.

The accounts of increasing togetherness through intercultural learning again employed an essentialising notion of culture. Partly, they merely continue the discourses of culture constructing togetherness: when people learn each other’s mindsets it is easier to get along and feel equal in each other’s company. Furthermore, however, they reveal the significance of one’s own ‘culture’, implying that ‘culture’ is also a matter of identity.

Discussion

Finnish youth with a migration background who participated in our study used 'culture' frequently in their discourses to describe similarity with other migrant-background youth and distance from the 'Finns'. Especially when used to construct togetherness, either among youth with a migration background or with 'Finns' living in the same neighbourhood, 'culture' stood for similar mindsets and equality. When used to construct distance between the youth with a migration background and 'Finns', the linguistic practice to differentiate between the 'foreigners' and the 'Finns' underscored the distance. Cultural traits were sometimes explicitly compared, but the power position of the 'Finns' was also constructed in ways that did not position the migrant-background youth as critically conscious: they did not seem to critically reflect on societal inequalities nor actively engage in efforts to address these inequalities (see e.g. Freire 1973; Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011). Instead, the interviewees seemed to passively adapt to the realities of the surrounding society by contrasting themselves with the majority population. This indicates they are structurally silenced (Giroux 1985).

The accounts of intercultural learning brought up the significance of 'culture' in validating migrant-background youth's identity (see Ladson-Billings 2021; Paris 2012). The value of learning about one's own cultural tradition was considered significant, but learning about other's habits and values was also described with enthusiasm that suggests a lack of their sufficient recognition by schools and the wider society. If migrant-background youth's cultural capital is perceived as devalued (see also Giroux 1985), a significant proportion of their knowledge and skills fail to be recognised, limiting their participation in society. Furthermore, intercultural learning was also constructed as a way to increase togetherness between 'Finns' and the migrant-background youth.

The participants' linguistic and discursive practices represent culture in essentialising ways, which aligns with previous studies (Bontenbal 2023; Gu, Mak, and Qu 2017; Svensson and Syed 2023; Varjonen et al. 2018). As linguistic practices, talking about 'cultures' and belonging to a 'culture' are examples of this type of discourse. As a discursive practice, defining 'culture' as a set of shared norms or communication styles also had the same effect. 'Culture' was also often talked about as something that did not need specification, used as the equivalent of 'same' or 'different', constructing a fixed, self-evident notion of culture. In previous studies, students have used this kind of categorisation to explain their lack of sense of community (Luoma and Peltola 2024). Such essentialising discursive practices related to 'culture' are common in Europe (e.g. Essed and Trienekens 2008), but negotiations on maintaining the heritage culture in migrant-background youth's homes may also be a significant source of this discourse (see e.g. Turjanmaa and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2020). Whereas the culturalising discourses of majority ethnic professionals sometimes set the mainstream cultural ideals and practices as superior to those of the cultural 'Other' (e.g. Kimanen 2018; Kimanen et al. 2022; Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2019), the minority youth's discourses often equate cultural similarity with equality. This implies the lack of equality in encounters with 'Finnishness'.

The participants' linguistic practice to label themselves as 'foreigners' is typical for youth with a migration background (see Haikkola 2011; Pauha 2018). The participants' social practice to construct their school and neighbourhood as specific places where 'diversity' was the norm and where 'Finns' understood the 'foreigners', raises questions. Arguably, the discourse that constructs belongingness to a diverse place enables positioning oneself as an insider, as a valued member of a community (Yuval-Davis 2011) and contradicts the otherwise questionable reputation of the socially disadvantaged neighbourhood. Thus, the participants construct a sense of belonging mainly in their neighbourhood where they are not in a disadvantaged position (Antonsich 2010). On the other hand, the same discourse also positions the participants as limitedly capable of becoming included outside these specific circumstances, to overcome the dominant norm of 'Finnishness' and the barriers involved in it.

Many of the accounts analysed here construct sense of belonging or lack of belonging, but not all. Especially the comparison of cultural practices and accounts of intercultural learning can better be understood under the broader notion of togetherness and distance. Hence, although processes of exclusion and inclusion are present in the discourses of the participants, togetherness and distance enable more nuanced interpretation of the social relations of migrant-background youth.

The participants' schools' practices in addressing cultural diversity were not a topic in the interviews. However, some interviewees described a specific theme day, Day of Cultures, in very positive terms. Although days like this often reduce culture to their outward aspects (Watkins and Noble 2019), contradicting some participants' own dominant discursive practices that defined culture as similar mindsets, the Day of Cultures seems to have had an important function of validating diverse cultural identities and traditions. Although in some interviews the cultural diversity of the schools in the neighbourhood is constructed as a dominant aspect of everyday life, there seems to be a need for specific days when this diversity is celebrated – perhaps as a rare opportunity to enact agency around one's minority culture at school (see Dewilde and Skrefsrud 2021).

The fact that the current study was a secondary analysis of the data generated for slightly different research questions is a limitation of the study in that we did not systematically inquire about the diverse ways culture was talked about in participants' communities or at school. Simultaneously, the natural occurrence of the construct of culture underscores its significance for the participants. It must also be noted that the analysis has only addressed togetherness and distance, not all functions of the construct.

If schools deliberately deconstructed the essentialising notion of culture it might help young people to find more nuanced explanations to their experiences of togetherness or distance, question the power imbalances and overcome cultural barriers (see also Freire 1973; Ladson-Billings 2021; Paris 2012). Were culture to be positioned more favourably, for example as a dynamic set of beliefs and practices continuously shaped by the social context (Gabbert 2006), 'diversity' would become a feature of all young people, including the 'Finns', without losing the opportunity to validate identities and highlight cultural traits significant for certain people (Ladson-Billings 2021; Paris 2012). Cultural theme days may be a valid method to portray the diversity of cultures as a topic where migrant-background students can have special expertise in. However, the celebration of diversity needs to be complemented by approaches that shift the perspective to power structures and change making.

Conclusion

The discourse analysis of interviews with 51 Finnish young people with migration background shows the significance and ambivalence of the category of 'culture': it is both a source of positive affirmation and a marker of boundaries. The analysis also reveals a lack of critical consciousness. The norm of Finnishness was embedded in their discursive practices concerning culture and diversity, not in the sense of adopting it as a developmental goal but in the sense of experienced and internalised exclusion. Future research should target the migrant-background's resources for constructing their notion of culture and potential resources for critical consciousness, both in Finland and elsewhere. In education, efforts should be made to deconstruct essentialising notions of culture and develop all young people's critical consciousness.

Note

1. By using quotation marks we want to underline that many terms discussed in this article such as culture, Finnish or foreigner are constructs that are in the process of negotiation. For the sake of readability, however, the quotation marks are sometimes left out.
2. These interviews were conducted by Samaneh Khalili, Anuleena Kimanen and Alekski Seger and transcribed by Anna Kuusela and Samaneh Khalili.

3. These interviews were conducted by Jenni Alisaari, Svenja Hammer, Samaneh Khalili, Anuleena Kimanen, Anna Kuusela, Sara Routarinne, Aleksii Seger and Kara Viesca. They were transcribed by Anna Kuusela.

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