



The Intersection of Identity and Professional Integration: A Study of Somali Professionals in Finland

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2026 Laurea





Laurea University of Applied Sciences

**The Intersection of Identity and Professional
Integration: A Study of Somali Professionals in
Finland**

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Bachelor of social services

Thesis

March 2026

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Year	2026	Number of pages	48
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This thesis explores the ways Somali-background professionals in Finland balance the connection between cultural identity and professional integration in the settings of education, employment, and entrepreneurship. The research will examine the pathways that facilitate the career growth of the participants as well as the barriers in the path of professional growth that the participants are faced with such as discrimination, institutional problems, and cultural adjustments.

A qualitative research approach was used, using semi-structured interviews with Somali-background professionals from diverse occupational fields. The interviews centered on the lived experiences of participants in terms of identity, belonging, and professional life within the Finnish context. The data was examined with an inductive and data-driven qualitative content analysis, through which recurring patterns and themes emerged from the interview material.

The findings indicate how Somali-background professionals actively balance their cultural identities while navigating structural constraints within Finnish professional environments. Social networks, resilience and strategies became important funding to professional growth, and how discrimination experiences and institutional constraints persisted in shaping career paths. The study contributes to discussions on diversity and inclusion in the Finnish labour market by foregrounding the voices and perspectives of Somali-background professionals.

The results also provide useful information to social services professionals, especially those operating within the employment guidance, integration, and culturally sensitive support areas by shedding light on how to enhance professional inclusion and equal support practices.

Keywords: Somali-background professionals, professional integration, cultural identity, qualitative research, Finland, inclusion

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1 Introduction

Migration has had an influential effect in the Finnish society over the decades. Finland is no longer a homogenous country, but rather a state with increasingly diverse cultural and ethnic identities, especially since the 1990s (Saukkonen 2020.) To most immigrant communities, though, the process of integration is a complex one particularly in terms of education, work, and entrepreneurship. The Somali diaspora is one of the oldest and most visible of these communities. Somali migration to Finland started in the early 1990s due to the civil war and currently, the Somali population is one of the largest immigrant-origin groups in the country (OSF 2014; Tiilikainen 2003.)

Even though they have been in Finland for a long time, the Somali-background professionals have persistently been unable to secure meaningful employment and reconcile their cultural identity with the requirements of the Finnish professional life. (OECD 2018;) At the same time, while challenges such as discrimination and qualification recognition persist, many Somali-background professionals in Finland have built strong careers and meaningful contributions in various fields, including education, health care, entrepreneurship, and community development. Their success stories reflect not only individual determination but also the power of social networks, cultural pride, and adaptability. The Somali community has long demonstrated resilience and innovation, turning structural barriers into opportunities for self-organization and growth. (Open Society Foundation 2013; Finnish Somali League n.d.)

This thesis explores the experiences of the Somali-background professionals in Finland regarding their integration into the professional circles and their cultures. It explores the strategies and pathways that help them access professional fields, identifies obstacles such as discrimination, language barriers, and recognition of qualifications, and seeks to provide lessons for fostering inclusive workplaces. The study also aims to contribute insights that can inform educators, employers, policymakers, and social services practitioners about supporting immigrant professionals more effectively.

Immigration is not only individual process but also a social process, and both the individuals and the host country must make some adjustments. The key to successful integration is allowing immigrants to become a full part of the social and professional life and supporting fair treatment and social cohesion. Finland possesses an excellent welfare system and a well-developed social service to take care of the immigrants, yet, structural obstacles, including acknowledgment of foreign qualifications, language issues, and implicit prejudices still influence the employment opportunities. To illustrate, the information about the labor market integration can indicate that immigrants tend to have a higher unemployment rate

and underemployment than the Finnish-born population. (Statistics Finland 2014, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2025.)

Besides this, the Somali population in Finland has been reported to face institutional obstacles within the workplace and other social services, even though they are evident in the Finnish society. Research has shown that Somalis often struggle to be recognized professionally, which may hinder their career advancement and their social affiliation. (OECD 2018; Yle 2023.) The knowledge of these dynamics can offer a basis of formulating practical measures towards enhancing inclusion, workplace policies and professional integration programs.

By focusing specifically on Somali-background professionals, this thesis bridges the gap between lived experiences and systemic integration strategies, offering a perspective that can help shape policies and practices for more equitable professional inclusion.

This research is also relevant to the field of social services, as its findings can help professionals working in integration, employment guidance and community work to better support Somali-background clients in their professional pathways.

This thesis was written by the authors, with limited use of AI tools to improve clarity in some sections.

1.1 Research based thesis

This is a research-based thesis that was done using qualitative inquiry. It employs semi-structured interviews to gain rich and in-depth views of Somali background professionals in the education, employment, and entrepreneurship sectors. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility for participants to express their experiences in their own words while providing the researcher with guidance to explore specific themes, making it particularly suited for understanding complex social phenomena. The study focuses on personal stories, to explore the meaning of how professionals interpret, navigate, and balance cultural identity in Finnish professional contexts. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate in this subject because it appreciates the lived experience and permits the themes of identity, belonging, and discrimination to naturally emerge through the voices of the participants. (Silverman 2010.) This approach also renders the findings not only academically relevant but practically useful for informing social services practice and integration policy.

A thesis that is based on research begins with a research problem or question, followed by scientific data gathering, analysis of data and finally presents organized presentation of the research findings. This is done by outlining the methodology adopted, how data was gathered and analyzed and discussion of the findings against the research questions. Lastly, conclusions

and recommendations are made to help in contributing to academic and professional practice. (Kananen 2011.)

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore how Somali-background professionals in Finland balance their cultural identity with processes of professional integration in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. The study seeks to generate knowledge that can benefit both academic researchers and professionals working with immigrant background individuals within the field of social services.

To be more specific, the study objectives were to explore the career opportunities of Somali-background professionals in Finland, identify barriers related to working life, understand how cultural identity can be relevant to work life, think about ways that social services can better assist the career development and integration of immigrant professionals.

1.2 Working life partner

The working life partner for this thesis was Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry (Finnish Somali Students Organization), a non-profit organization that represents Somali students and professionals in Finland. The association works to strengthen the Somali student community by offering academic guidance, professional mentoring, and networking opportunities, while also promoting advocacy and personal development (Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry 2023.) Its activities extend to both current students and graduates, supporting their educational progress and career pathways in Finland and beyond (Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry 2023.)

Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry had a unique standpoint as a collaborator of this thesis due to several reasons. To begin with, its networks cover both students and professionals, granting us direct access to prospective participants to interview. Second, the organization, itself, serves as an intermediary between Somali-origin people and Finnish institutions, which provides an informative perspective on the challenges and opportunities of professional integration. Third, its mission is well aligned with the goals of this study because both were aimed at aiding the academic and professional achievements of people with Somali background in Finland. (Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry 2023.)

This cooperation was enhanced by the fact that the researchers were also the chairman and the vice-chairman of Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry. This positionality made it possible to reach the participants and helped in the building of trust throughout the process of conducting research. Simultaneously, the researchers upheld academic integrity and ethical rigor by adhering to voluntary participation, disclosing their roles and position, and being reflexively aware of potential bias.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the study. A study on professionals of Somali background in Finland is a complicated phenomenon which cannot be interpreted within the frame of one discipline. Rather, they need a multidisciplinary framework of migration and integration research, sociology, critical race theory, and social work. The combination of these views offers an analytical framework to look at how Somali professionals bargain identity to overcome systemic obstacles and build professional belonging. Their experiences are also placed in the context of the wider discussion of human, social as well as cultural capital, entrepreneurship as a pathway to integration, the role played by social services, and the impact of discrimination, racism, and whiteness in the professional environment in Finland.

2.1 Somali community in Finland

The Somali community is one of the largest immigrant-origin groups in Finland. Migration from Somalia to Finland mostly began in the early 1990s, primarily because of the civil war in Somalia, which led to a significant number of Somali asylum seekers arriving in the country. Since then, Somalis have become one of the most visible and organized minority groups in Finland. They have maintained strong cultural, religious, and community ties through associations, mosques, and grassroots organizations. (Open Society Foundations 2013.)

The Somali population today is present in most sectors of the Finnish society, such as education, politics, sports, entrepreneurship, and social activism, which contributes to the increasing cultural diversity of the country (Finnish Somali League n.d.; Open Society Foundations 2013). The Somali community is a significant case to consider the integration of immigrants and their social inclusion in Finland due to their demographic importance and because of how long they have been in the country. (Open Society Foundation 2013.)

Despite these contributions, research consistently highlights persistent challenges in integration outcomes. The Somalis in Helsinki report shows that Somali-background people experience significant employment difficulties, including high unemployment rates, barriers to having qualifications recognized, and discrimination in the job market, which in turn weakens their sense of belonging (Open Society Foundations 2013.) Studies also highlight challenges in housing access, reports of everyday racism, and stereotyping, which compound difficulties in integration (Rastas 2021.) At the same time, the community has shown resilience and agency: Somali associations, religious institutions, and student organizations play an active role in providing support, mentorship, and advocacy for equal opportunities (Hautaniemi, Ali, & Tiilikainen 2013; Finnish Somali League 2013.)

Historically, Somali people have been described as extraordinary in endurance, ambition, and resourcefulness traits that manifest in narratives of diaspora success. For instance, historical accounts note Somalis who ventured abroad, succeeded, and then returned to their homeland, proudly displaying their achievements. (Jardine 1923.) Such traditions of resilience may inform contemporary Somali professionals' capacity to persevere through structural barriers.

Professional integration can be defined as the process towards which immigrants are able to acquire entry and be involved in the labor market with recognition of their skills, accessibility of employment opportunities as well as being in a stable position in the working life. The OECD (2018) defines this process as being influenced by two structural factors: policies to recognize foreign qualifications, labor market opportunities, and institutional support, and individual strategies, which include language learning, networking, and entrepreneurship.

2.2 Human capital theory

Human capital theory emphasizes that education, training, and experience are key resources in improving the productivity and career choices of individuals. According to The Oxford Handbook of Human Capital, human capital may be taken as the knowledge, skills and competencies, which individuals have and are able to convert into economic and social benefits once they are successfully tapped in the labor market. (Burton-Jones and Spender 2011.)

However, not all returns on human capital are equal. Barriers to the value of immigrant professional qualifications and experience are common in the Finnish context. For example, a correspondence study shows that candidates with Somali names are much less likely to receive an interview invitation than equally qualified candidates with Finnish names, indicating that despite Somali-origin professionals investing in education and skills in line with human capital theory, structural obstacles such as discrimination and undervaluation of foreign qualifications limit their professional integration. (Ahmad 2019.)

Human Capital Theory helps address the part of the research question related to professional integration. It explains how education, training, and work experience contribute to career development among Somali-background professionals, while also showing how the undervaluation of foreign qualifications creates barriers to equal participation. (Burton-Jones & Spender 2011.)

2.3 Social Capital theory

Social capital means the benefits people get from their relationships. It's about how knowing people, trusting each other, and helping each other can give someone access to support or

opportunities. How much you benefit depends on your position in society. (Bourdieu 1986). Putnam distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital, as bonding refers to strong ties among people in small groups and bridging refers to ties involving people representing diverse groups, as bonding and bridging, respectively. (Putnam 2000.)

For the Somali background professionals, social capital is an important aspect in obtaining job opportunities, mentoring, and support systems. Bonding social capital in the Somali community can offer emotional and collective resources, while bridging the social capital with the Finnish professionals can help in integrating into the wider labor market.

Besides the difference that exists between bonding and bridging social capital, Putnam (2000) highlights the fact that both types of social capital play different yet complementary roles in facilitating the social and professional incorporation of individuals. Bonding social capital enhances solidarity in close-knit communities through emotional support, shared identity, and support. In the case of immigrant and minority groups, including the representatives of the Somali background, bonding social capital can prove very important during initial years of settlement and career building, providing practical assistance, motivation, and new sense of belonging in the world where one might feel excluded or marginalized. (Putnam 2000.)

The bonding social capital can be empowering however it may curtail access to broader opportunities unless it is supplemented through bridging social capital. Bridging social capital links individuals to wider networks in terms of ethnic, cultural, and professional dimensions and it is specifically significant in terms of education, employment and access to institutional facilities. Access to professional networks, access to information on career opportunities and access to recognition in majority-dominated labour markets are some of the areas bridging social capital can help achieve in the Finnish context. Consequently, effective professional integration is usually contingent to the capacity to be closely connected with the community and at the same time establishing the network outside of one close social circle. (Putnam 2000.)

2.4 Cultural capital

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to those non-economic resources that determine the social mobility and social standing of an individual in a social or professional domain. He distinguishes three types of cultural capital: embodied that comprises long-term dispositions, skills, and knowledge realized in the course of socialization and personal experience, objectified that involves tangible cultural products such as books, instruments, or tools that proclaim social position, and institutionalized, which are formally acknowledged credentials, diplomas, or certifications enabling individuals to take advantage of professional and social opportunity. Bourdieu points out that the cultural capital value is relative and can be said to have varying value across different social domains such that an

asset appreciated and rewarded in one domain may not have comparable value in a different one. The framework shows that the mediation of access to opportunities is often achieved through the acknowledgment and legitimizing of cultural assets. (Bourdieu 1986.)

Among the professionals of Somali origin in Finland, the vision of institutionalized cultural capital developed by Bourdieu is especially applicable in the context of foreign degrees and professional qualifications. The qualifications are usually viewed to undergo complicated evaluation procedures, retraining needs, or official validation by Finnish authorities to be considered like local standards. Although the qualifications are recognized, employers might not value foreign qualifications or might be ignorant of their relevance, and they may under-employ or assign the person duties that are not relevant to his/her expertise; a condition that is commonly known as brain waste. (Prakash 2009.)

These obstacles bring out the fact that Bourdieu (1986) has asserted that the value of cultural capital is compared to the recognition and validation mechanisms that are in the field. In coping with these obstacles, community networks, mentoring, and organizational support such as the one offered by Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry tend to help Somali professionals but more comprehensive systemic changes need to be introduced so that foreign qualifications are fairly assessed and the immigrants could exercise their expertise in the Finnish labor market fully.

2.5 Cultural identity

Cultural identity is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, especially relevant to people who must live their lives in a diaspora. Stuart Hall (1990) believes that cultural identity is not a predetermined identity, but a process which is created under the influence of historical, social, and personal experiences. It is a collective memory, and an ever-changing, personal sense of self, in which the tensions between origins and environments are negotiated between the values, norms and traditions passed on by the Somali culture and the demands of the Finnish professional and social life. (Hall 1990). Such a dual process might contribute to a negotiated identity that is adaptive and resilient and enables people to remain connected to their own roots while also engaging in full membership of the host society.

Hall (1990) explains that cultural identity should not be understood in only two ways. It is not just about cultural background or heritage, but also about lived experience, which is constantly changing. The former dimension emphasizes shared history, language, and traditions that unite members of a diaspora and gives them a sense of belonging and continuity. The second dimension is concerned with the subjective story of the individual and how identity is constructed through experiencing differences in terms of cultural, linguistic and institutional experiences. (Hall 1990). Professionally, Somali-origin individuals can feel both endorsed and conflicted as their cultural behavior collides with work standards, school

demands, and career standards. These spaces necessitate a reflective practice in terms of one's own cultural identity within the context of the wider society.

Understanding cultural identity in this way offers valuable insights for examining professional integration. By acknowledging the fluid and negotiated nature of identity, researchers can explore how these professionals construct meaning from their experiences, develop coping strategies for challenges such as discrimination or recognition of qualifications, and utilize cultural knowledge as a resource in their careers. Hall's conceptualization underscores that cultural identity is both a source of individual empowerment and a lens through which broader social structures and intercultural dynamics can be understood. (Hall 1990.)

2.6 Entrepreneurship as a Pathway

Entrepreneurship is a common alternative route to the formal labor market, which immigrants take due to their exclusion. In Finland, self-employment is disproportionately occupied by immigrants as opposed to the native born. Indicatively, in 2024, 12 percent of working persons of foreign origin were entrepreneurs compared to 11 percent of persons of Finnish origin (Statistics Finland 2024). This tendency indicates not only opportunity, but also need: entrepreneurship can allow economic involvement, and it often appears through the inability to access the mainstream employment market (ETLA 2018.)

Among immigrant groups, Somali-background individuals have been notably active in establishing small businesses. A study highlights that immigrants in Helsinki have increasingly engaged in ethnic retail, creating businesses that cater to their communities. These ventures often include grocery shops, restaurants, and taxi services, providing essential services while fostering community cohesion. (Lilius & Hewidy 2019.)

Nevertheless, the reasons and issues of the Somali entrepreneurs are complicated. There have been studies which show that, although some Somali immigrants have explored the entrepreneurship sector, the population is relatively low. Educational background, language barriers, and limited access to capital have been cited as being among the major barriers (Harinen 2014). However, successful people tend to be resilient and innovative and have helped to diversify the entrepreneurial environment in Finland.

New statistics availed by the Statistics Finland further explain the entrepreneurial environment in Finland among the immigrant populations. In 2024, there were about 14,560 individuals in Finland whose birth country was Somalia, most of whom were located in the Helsinki metropolitan region (Statistics Finland, 2024). Access to support services, social and professional networks, as well as the overall socio-economic conditions, are among the factors that shape the entrepreneurial activity of this population group.

Although Somali-based people in Finland have achieved remarkable contributions in the entrepreneurship field, there are still challenges. To solve these problems, specific assistance such as access to education, language training, and financial resources are needed to be more involved in the sphere of entrepreneurship.

2.7 Social Services and Integration

Social services are key to helping immigrants integrate into Finnish society. They provide vital support like language training, job assistance, welfare programs, health services, and personalized integration plans. Under Finnish law, immigrants with permanent residence and some permit statuses have the right to social security and healthcare services that are similar to those offered to citizens. This establishes a basic level of inclusion and dignity. (THL, 2024; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2024.)

Integration services in municipalities offer customized support through integration plans. These plans evaluate each person's language skills, education history, and job potential. They coordinate services such as language classes, counseling, job support, and social welfare as needed. Municipal initiatives have improved over the years due to Finland's integration policy framework. This ensures that immigrants, including those of Somali backgrounds, receive comprehensive support that encourages self-sufficiency and well-being. (THL 2024.)

One important model is the social pedagogical counselling approach developed by Nivala, Hämäläinen, and Pakarinen (2022). It operates through non-formal adult education institutions like folk high schools and study centers. This model focuses on long-term counselling relationships, personalized learning goals, and respect for cultural diversity. It helps immigrant students gain language and professional skills. It also aids in developing confidence, social belonging, and intercultural competence. (Nivala, Hämäläinen, & Pakarinen 2022.)

While challenges remain, such as delays in accessing certain services, variability in quality across municipalities, and occasional cultural misunderstandings, many Somali-background professionals report positive experiences with these services. Participation in language courses, cultural orientation, and employment programs often leads to greater confidence and clearer career pathways. These professionals display resilience by using social networks and acquired skills to successfully integrate into Finnish workplaces, despite the challenges they face. (THL 2024; OECD 2023.)

Policy developments show ongoing progress. The reform of the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (Act 681/2023) entered into force on 1 January 2025, transferring responsibility for integration services to municipalities. This reform is expected to particularly

benefit groups such as Somali-background professionals by improving recognition of prior experience and access to Finnish labor markets. (European Commission 2024.)

Overall, Finland's social service system provides Somali-background individuals both support and opportunity. As beneficiaries, they receive essential integration and welfare assistance. As professionals, they contribute their experience and intercultural skills to the social service sector. This helps build a more inclusive society (Nivala, Hämäläinen, & Pakarinen 2022; THL 2024.)

2.8 Discrimination and Racism in Professional Settings

Discrimination has also been an enormous hindrance to immigrant professionals in Finland especially those of Somali origin. In a 2020 study, Ahmad emphasizes the fact that ethnic discrimination in the workplace is usually expressed through biased behavior, including unfair treatment of individuals based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. Such discriminatory acts have the potential to impair career development and health of people, both mentally and physically (Ahmad 2020).

Moreover, "everyday racism", as Rastas (2009) calls it, implies the habitual and normalized types of prejudice, which minorities must undergo in their daily routine. This involves implicit forms of discrimination that are indirect yet omnipresent and effective. These experiences may lead to a feeling of marginalization and alienation of the Somali-origin professionals in the Finnish labor force.

According to how the critical race theory (CRT) has been expressed by Delgado and Stefancic, racism is not a personal bias, but a structural problem ingrained in the society. This view plays a pivotal role in explaining why applicants of Somali-origin still endure a disadvantaged situation in terms of employment. The inequalities and restricted opportunities of these professionals remain due to structural barriers that encompass biased recruitment strategies and institutional racism. (Delgado and Stefancic 2017.)

These findings are also supported by recent research. As an example, in a 2023 study by the Finnish Medical Association, doctors of foreign origin report more frequent experiences of racism at work than their Finnish colleagues. According to the survey, about 6% of the participants reported having faced discrimination based on their foreign origin or skin tone at the workplace. (Yle 2023.)

Additionally, research by Loukola examines experiences of racism among people of African descent in Finland, noting that such discrimination is prevalent even in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. This early exposure to racism can have long-term effects

on the professional trajectories of Somali-background individuals, influencing their career choices and opportunities. (Loukola 2025.)

2.9 Whiteness and Privilege in Finnish Professional Spaces

Whiteness theory can be used to understand the way majority norms become an unseen baseline, and how they influence how we think of who counts as professional. Whiteness is perceived by scholars as a unmarked social privilege and cultural norms (Frankenberg 1993) and white privilege is referred to as the unnoticed package of unearned benefits that are enjoyed by those racialized as white in institutions and in day-to-day life (McIntosh 1988.)

According to recent Finnish studies, this is a dynamic. In Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality, researchers demonstrate that the concept of normative Finnishness is implicitly racialized, and an imperceptible distinction having non-white Finns as outsiders exists, no matter whether they are citizens or long-term residents. This does affect social belonging but also professional recognition and inclusion. (Hougaerts et al. 2022.)

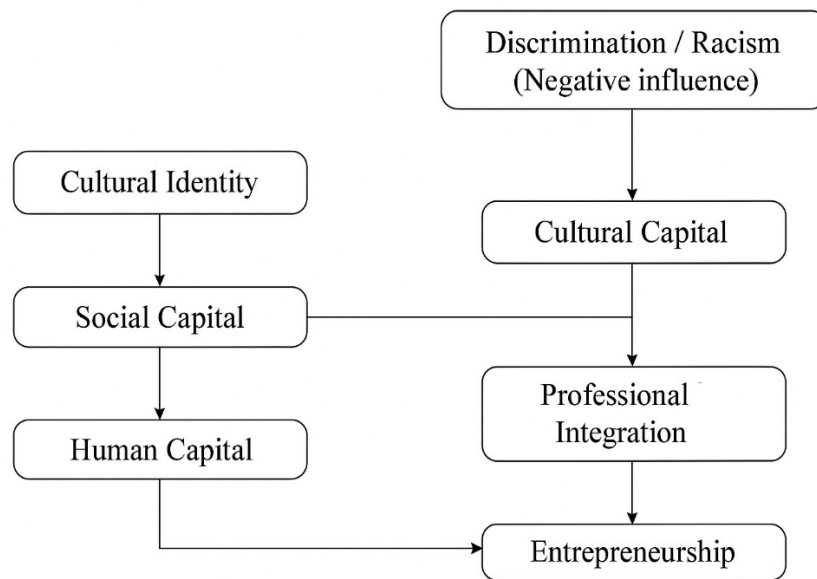
These points are supported by data surveys. According to the MoniSuomi survey conducted by the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare (THL), immigrants in Finland are commonly affected by discrimination based on their origins, ethnicity or colour of their skin, with African-origin surveyed individuals reporting the highest rates. This illustrates whiteness as an invisible privilege, which affects those considered to be naturally most appropriate to work in Finnish workplaces and those who need to strive more to prove themselves. (THL 2024.)

Whiteness can be reproduced in tacit ways of institutional practices. As an illustration, a qualitative study of the recruitment of candidates in Finnish municipal politics concludes that party recruitment processes are biased in favor of those candidates that align with implicit norms of Finnish (language, networks, cultural signaling) which aids in reproducing under-representation of ethnic and migrant minorities; the identified mechanisms of the aforementioned study (e.g. the use of informal networks, ideal candidate images) can be applied as an analytical perspective to workplace recruitment and promotion processes. (Sipinen and Seikkua 2022.)

However, Finnish anti-racism training and public health agencies also directly address the topics of whiteness and white privilege: guidance content on professional topics talks about whiteness as an unmarked norm in Finland and teaches institutions to recognize and remove everyday entitlements that benefit majority-ethnic employees at the disadvantage of others (Souto, 2025; THL 2024). This institutionalization is significant since it will no longer be an invisible phenomenon, but rather an organizational problem that can be tackled using training and policy

To the professionals of the Somali background, these implications are practical: whiteness defines what qualifications and behaviors are perceived directly and what needs to be proved repeatedly. Meanwhile, numerous Somali professionals actively negotiate, challenge and re-configure these norms such as through community connections, bridging connections, further local accreditation or by taking the path of entrepreneurship as a means of professional esteem.

Figure 1 This conceptual model is created by the authors based on Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (2000), Hall (1990), and Silverman (2011).



As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework used in this thesis is based on Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capital, Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, Hall's (1990) understanding of cultural identity as a dynamic process, and Silverman's (2011) emphasis on meaning-making within social contexts. These theories collectively form the basis for analyzing how identity, capital, and structural conditions shape the professional experiences of Somali-background professionals in Finland.

This framework shows how cultural identity forms the foundation for Somali-background professionals' integration in Finland. Social, cultural, and human capital work together to support professional success, while discrimination and racism act as barriers that weaken these links. Entrepreneurship appears as an alternative pathway when access to employment is limited. The model highlights how identity, resources, and external factors interact to shape integration outcomes.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research questions

Research questions provide a clear focus for qualitative research and guide both data collection and analysis (Silverman 2011). For this thesis, the main research questions were:

1. How do Somali-background professionals in Finland balance cultural identity and professional integration?
2. What barriers (e.g., language, discrimination, recognition of qualifications) do they face in employment, education, and entrepreneurship?
3. How can social services use this knowledge to improve support for immigrant professionals?

3.2 Data collection

Rationale for interviews

In this study, the qualitative research approach guided the overall design of the thesis. The data collection technique was semi-structured interviews which gave the respondents a chance to share their experiences in their own words. The data collected in the interview was then analyzed by means of inductive qualitative content analysis whereby the themes and patterns were isolated directly out of the data.

Qualitative research approach was especially appropriate since it made possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of how people combine cultural identity and professional integration in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Qualitative research focuses on the complexity and nuances of social life, representing the perspectives of participants and their experiences instead of focusing on numerical data only. (Silverman 2011.)

Qualitative research was especially valuable when studying a phenomenon that is not well understood or is in context specific. In this thesis, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the strategies, challenges, and successes of Somali-background professionals. This approach allowed the research to remain flexible, adapting to participants' narratives while systematically identifying recurring themes and patterns. By focusing on participant's lived experiences, the study aimed to uncover insights that can inform inclusive practices and policies in professional environments. (Silverman 2011.)

Since the integration of Somali-background professionals in Finland has not been widely studied, this research used an exploratory qualitative approach. As Silverman points out, exploratory research fits well in situations with little existing knowledge. (Silverman 2011) The aim here was to build understanding instead of testing hypotheses. By interviewing a

small but diverse group of participants from different professional backgrounds (see appendix), this thesis sought to find new patterns, meanings, and interpretations that can inform future research and improve policies.

Selection and recruitment of participants

The research was aimed at professionals of Somali background who reside in Finland. Rather than choosing the participants according to rigorous criteria, we had an opportunity to be referred to the potential participants through our working-life partner organization that already cooperates with Somali professionals working in other areas. They assisted us in reaching people who may be interested in participating. The option to participate was entirely voluntary and the decisions of whether to participate were made by the individuals themselves.

Interview questions and their justification

An interview guide was prepared in advance and contained open-ended questions related to our research topic. Nonetheless, participants were encouraged to express their own ideas, anecdotes and experiences more broadly, even when these were outside of the questions upon which we were inquiring. This provided room to learn new and significant things.

The interviews were open-ended and participant-directed, but the interviewees discussed the topics of the interview guide in accordance with the theoretical framework of Chapter 2. The formation of themes was influenced by such concepts as forms of capital presented by Bourdieu (1986), the difference between bonding and bridging social capital provided by Putnam (2000), a perspective of cultural identity as the dynamic process offered by Hall (1990). The questions were thus formulated to address such aspects on professional pathways, identity formation, social networks, structural barriers and institutional support, and nevertheless leave room to other emergent meanings that may be a resultant outcome of lived experiences of the participants.

To ensure a clear but flexible structure, the interviews followed broad themes (see table 1-5) that correspond to the research objectives. Within each theme, open-ended questions guided the discussion while allowing participants to freely express their experiences and reflections (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009.)

The interviews were organized around the following themes and questions:

Table 1 Theme 1 - Professional Background and Pathway

Question no.	Questions
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1	Can you walk me through your professional journey in Finland and how you arrived at your current role?
2	What experiences or decisions do you feel have had the biggest impact on your career path?

Table 2 Theme 2 - Cultural Identity and Professional Life

Question no	Questions
3	In what ways does your Somali cultural identity influence how you see yourself as a professional?
4	Can you describe a moment when your cultural background felt especially visible either in a positive or challenging way in a professional setting?

Table 3 Theme 3 - Barriers and Discrimination

Question no	Questions
5	What kinds of obstacles have you encountered in Finland's professional environments?
6	Have you ever experienced discrimination or felt treated differently in work or educational contexts? If yes, how did it shape your experiences?

Table 4 Theme 4 - Support, Strategies, and Resources

Question no	Questions
7	What kinds of networks, relationships, or support systems have helped you progress professionally?
8	Are there particular strategies or personal strengths you rely on to navigate Finnish professional environments?

Table 5 Theme 5 - Role of Social Services and Future Improvements

Question no	Questions
9	How have integration or employment services supported or failed to support your professional development?
10	If you could change one thing about how these services operate, what would it be?

In addition, optional follow-up questions were used when relevant to deepen the discussion. These included reflections on the meaning of belonging in Finnish professional life, the balance between Somali identity and professional identity, and advice participants would give to younger Somali individuals entering the Finnish labour market.

Conducting the interviews

This study used individual semi-structured interviews to gather data. In this approach, the participants were given the freedom of expressing themselves in their own words, narrating information relating to cultural identity, career life, challenges and achievements. Semi-structured interviews were particularly effective when it came to the exploration of personal experience and other sensitive issues, as they offer guidance and flexibility. (Silverman 2011.)

The interview was individual rather than in groups to have privacy and create a secure environment where the participants can freely give personal details including identity, discrimination, and professional growth. Participants provided informed consent to audio-record the interviews

The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. This format allowed flexibility in scheduling and enabled participants to join from different locations, while still ensuring privacy, confidentiality, and sufficient audio quality for transcription.

Participants were free to choose the language most comfortable for them. In all interviews, Somali, English, or Finnish were used. The interviews were open-ended in nature, allowing participants to lead the conversation toward what they considered most relevant.

Description of the data

In total, five interviews were conducted between 9 November 2025 and 22 December 2025. The interviews were conducted individually, taking about 45-85 minutes each or an average of one hour.

Handling and preparing the data

An information sheet (see appendix 1) and a consent form (see appendix 2) were given to the participants before every interview such that it explains the need for research, the use of the interview and the confidentiality and the right to pull out at any point in time. Interviews were not initiated before the informed consent.

The authors transcribed the interviews word-to-word. The original structure, expressions, and meanings of the speech of the participants were preserved with the help of verbatim transcription. Around 25 pages of text were produced and the formatting used was Times New Roman font 12 with 1.5 spacing. All those fillers, repetition, and pauses that added to meaning were retained whereas the unnecessary technical interruptions were eliminated.

In the interviews, which were done in Somali and Finnish translation into English was also utilized in the process of transcription. Special attention was paid to the fact that the translations did not lack the intended meaning, expressions, and tone of the participants.

All the information was kept safe. The audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected folders, and only the researchers had access to them. Instead of using personal names, anonymous codes (e.g., P1, P2) were used. The audio recordings will permanently be destroyed at the completion of the thesis process, and the anonymized transcripts were stored as per the university policy.

3.3 Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a technique that is applied to analyze written material systematically to find the meanings, patterns and themes of the material. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi, there are two primary methods of content analysis, which are deductive and inductive. A deductive method begins with some theories or pre-existing categories and generalizes them on the data, and an inductive method permits categories and themes to be found out of the data without prior assumptions. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009.)

An inductive content analysis was applied in this research. The reason why this approach was adopted was that the professional integration experiences of Somali- background professionals in Finland are not well studied and the existing theory was not adequate to be able to reveal the complexity of the lived experiences of the participants. The inductive approach ensured that it was possible to be open to new understanding and that the analysis relied heavily on personal accounts by participants, as opposed to putting them into predetermined categories. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009.)

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009), content analysis proceeds with three main stages: data reduction, clustering, and abstraction. These stages were followed in this study

Data reduction:

Data reduction is the process of summarizing long and qualitative data into shorter significant statements without losing meaning (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009). This action enables the researcher to concentrate on the content of the research that is directly related to the research questions.

In this study, interview transcripts were read several times. The statements concerning identity, professional integration, discrimination, resilience, and support were shortened into expressions. Table 6 below provides an example of data reduction, showing how original interview excerpts were shortened into reduced expressions.

Table 6 Example of data reduction

Original interview answers	Reduced answers
“I always feel like I have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously in my workplace.”	Need to work harder to gain recognition

“Being Somali is part of who I am, but sometimes I feel I have to hide it at work.”	Concealing cultural identity at work
“My family and community motivated me when I faced discrimination.”	Support from community
“Even when doors were closed, I kept finding other ways forward.”	Persistence despite barriers

Clustering:

Clustering is defined as the reduction of similar expressions reduced by grouping them in clusters to determine patterns and common meanings (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009). The reason behind this step is to assist in organizing the information into larger categories that represent the recurring experience in all the participants. Reduced expressions in this study were compared between all the interviews and clustered together in groups depending on similarity. For example, Table 7 shows how reduced expressions were clustered into preliminary themes.

Table 7 Example of clustering

Reduced answers	Cluster
Need to work harder to gain recognition	Structural barriers
Concealing cultural identity at work	Identity managements
Support from community	Social support networks
Persistence despite barriers	Resilience strategies

Abstracting into Main Findings:

Abstraction is the final step of content analysis which entails creating themes of higher levels that can be used to summarize the data that has been clustered (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009). The abstract expression is converted to conceptual discoveries, which describe the essence of the experience of participants through abstraction. Clusters, in this case, were summarized into primary themes, which directly informed the Results chapter. The way clusters were abstracted into general themes is presented in the Table below.

Table 7 Example of abstraction into main findings

Cluster	Main findings
Structural barriers	Experience of discrimination and inequality
Identity management	Balancing cultural identity and professional life
Social support networks	Role of community and networks
Resilience strategies	Persistence and self-driven success

The tables above show the direction taken by the analysis starting with raw data of the interviews to abstract themes. Illustrative tables increase transparency and show how interpretations were derived systematically out of the data according to the methodological framework of (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009).

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research is the cornerstone to any scientific work. Honesty, reliability, respect, and responsibility are the key values of ethical research, according to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019). Honesty states that there is no fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation of data, and reliability is that methods are reported in such a way that they can be evaluated or replicated by others. Respect encompasses protecting the dignity, rights and well-being of all research participants and responsibility entails the authors to reflect on the possible effects of their research on individuals, communities and society in general. These principles are the foundation of every decision made in this thesis, even the planning of research design and reporting the findings. The consideration of autonomy, voluntary participation, and accountability is considered the key to safeguarding the integrity of the study. (TENK 2019.)

Along with these general scientific standards, social work research is associated with ethical obligations. Human dignity, social justice, and respect for cultural diversity are among the values that are highlighted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFS 2018). The mentioned values are especially topical when it comes to situations that involve minority or immigrant groups in which the chances of stereotyping, misrepresenting, or supporting marginalization are great. The ethics of social work thus demand an additional effort on the part of researchers to safeguard participants and assure informed consent as well as to provide a voice to otherwise unheard perspectives. Banks (2021) also emphasizes that the social work ethics is not only about avoiding harm but also about empowerment, equality, and the recognition of the participants as agents in their lives. Here, confidentiality and anonymity are no longer considered merely procedural but also primary ethical practices:

they safeguard participants against being recognized in a manner that may harm their careers or reputation especially in communities as small and visible as Somali-background professionals in Finland. (IFSW 2018; Banks 2021.)

In applying these principles, this thesis conducted semi-structured interviews only with voluntary participants who were given informed consent. Participants were provided with clear information about the purpose of the research, the expected use of the data, and their right to withdraw at any point without negative consequences. Consent included agreement for audio recording and anonymized use of quotations. Data was securely stored in line with institutional and GDPR requirements, and all identifiable details such as names or workplaces were anonymized.

The authors gave importance to present the experiences of the participants in a responsible manner. Although topics like racism, undervaluation of foreign qualifications, and the privilege of whiteness was recognized, in this research, the Somali-background professionals were not to be represented only as victims. Instead, their resilience, agency and good education, employment and entrepreneurial tracks were emphasized. This was consistent with the principles of social work because it involved trade-offs between acknowledging structural barriers and the focus on the strengths and contributions of the participants to the Finnish society. (Banks 2020; IFSW 2018.)

The other critical ethical concern was the dual role of the researchers who are both members of the Somali student organization and academic researchers. This stance fostered a feeling of trust and ease of access but also had the threats of prejudice or role confusion. Reflexivity and transparency were given priority to solve this. The researchers clearly identified their organizational role in information materials, ensured that the participation was completely voluntary, and ensured that they separated personal and research roles. Bias was tracked via reflexive journaling and supervision, so that the findings were driven by the voice of the participants and not organizational interests.

In general, ethics was viewed in this research as a continuous process, not a single step. Ethical reflection was used in all the stages of the research process- recruitment of participants, data analysis and ultimately in reporting of the findings. It focused on generating knowledge of high academic quality, cultural awareness and practical value while upholding the dignity, agency, and professional identities of Somali-based professionals in Finland.

3.5 Reliability

Trustworthiness as opposed to statistical reliability is the measure of quality of findings in qualitative research. Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transparency are the qualitative research principles followed in this study to ensure trustworthiness. (Leung, 2015.) Since the study was based on the lived experiences of Somali-background professionals, special care was given to the research design, documentation and reflexivity during the research process.

Credibility is used to describe the degree to which the findings accurately represent the views and real lives of the participants. Leung reveals that credibility is attained when the relationship between the statements of the participants and the interpretation made by the researcher is evident. The readers ought to have a chance to believe that the conclusions are based on the facts and not on the presumptiveness of the researcher. (Leung 2015.)

In this work, credibility was enhanced by gathering information of Somali-origin professionals operating in other fields. The comparison of experiences between the participants enabled prevalent patterns of experience and opposing perspectives to come out. Moreover, the interviewees were interviewed and reviewed by two researchers, further contributing to minimization of individual bias. The participants also had the chance to go over their responses which were summarized so that they could make sure that their interpretations were reflected well.

Reflexivity is a concept that deals with the consciousness of the researcher and their involvement, background, and positions in the research. Leung states that reflexivity is essential in qualitative studies as the researcher is now involved in the sense making process and would potentially affect the process of data collection and interpretation. (Leung 2015.)

Reflexivity was applied in this research by using reflective notes in writing post-interview. The researchers made their record of the reactions, assumptions and observations related to the situation of the interview and their own positionality. This assisted in making sure that the interpretations were based on the story of the participants and not the expectations of the people themselves.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants' accounts rather than by researcher bias. Confirmability is strengthened when researchers provide a transparent link between the data and the conclusions. (Leung 2015.)

To support confirmability, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and thematic coding was carried out systematically. Emerging themes were reviewed and discussed by both

researchers, and disagreements were resolved by returning to the original transcripts. This ensured that interpretations were grounded in the participants' own words.

4 Results

The chapter provides the findings of the interviews with Somali-background professionals employed in Finland. The purpose of the interviews was to understand their careers, experiences of working life, identity, belonging sense and their perception of employment and integration services. The results are grounded in personal descriptions, experiences and perceptions of the participants

It is necessary to underline that the findings do not reflect objective assessments of Finnish institutions or employers. Instead, they are the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The interviews also demonstrated both positive experiences regarding professional integration as well as issues regarding support systems and belonging.

Patterns of similarity in the descriptions of professional journeys, identities, and experiences of Somali background professionals working in the Finnish society were strong in the interviews. Even though the participants were in completely diverse professions, such as social work, medicine, public health research, banks, and entrepreneurship, their stories had remarkable similarities in the way they perceived success, responsibility, belonging, and structural barriers.

4.1 Persistence and Self-Driven Success

In all interviews, the participants talked about their careers as the outcome of conscious effort, planning, and perseverance. It was not explained that professional success is accidental and easy but rather something that needs strategic choices and endurance. P1 Spoke about her educational journey and how she ended up in her current profession. She initially started studying nursing but changed her mind to pursue a degree in social services as she found it intriguing. P3 also said that she did not want to pursue a career in business management even after finishing her degree due to lack of meaning she found in it and instead chose to go into public health,

“Finishing that degree was a turning point, because I decided to change fields completely... I wanted to do meaningful work.”

For P5, career development was built around a detailed long-term plan that structured his entire life in Finland,

“I sat down and made a strict, achievable plan... finishing my primary, secondary, profession school, bachelors and teachers training... This is what got me to where I am today.”

P4 also described actively pushing his way into professional life through persistence rather than institutional support, explaining how he physically went to a bank to ask for an internship and built his career from there,

“I went to the branch of a local bank, walked there and asked for the supervisor... I said that I needed an internship and I got it.”

These stories reveal that professional success was not something that was automatic and delivered by Finnish systems to participants, but something that needed to be built by initiative and ambition.

4.2 Balancing Cultural Identity and Professional Life

A second major pattern across all interviews was a strong sense of collective responsibility connected to Somali identity. The participants described their ambition to succeed as not individual, but rather as something with implications for family and community. P2 said she felt her identity gave her a sense of duty to others,

“I do not think only about myself but about my family, my community, and the ummah (community).”

P3 similarly described feeling that her success carried symbolic meaning,

“I feel that I represent more than just myself... my success reflects on Somalis as a whole.”

For P5, this responsibility was especially tied to his role as a father and community member,

“What kind of legacy will you leave them with? I wanted an education that my children can inherit from me and improve my community with.”

Even P4, who experienced relatively little discrimination in banking, framed his work as contributing to society and belonging,

“Work is important... it adds a sense of belonging, it increases health, it strengthens a person’s trust.”

Thus, professional life was consistently connected to ideas of honor, representation, and contribution to the wider Somali community.

4.3 Experience of Discrimination and Inequality

The third theme was the experience of visibility and difference in Finnish professional and educational settings. This was exhibited through race, religion, or language, by some participants. P2 explained the experience of being always noticed and judged because she wears a hijab. This is a garment that covers the hair worn by Muslim women.

“People doubt my skills until they realize I speak fluent Finnish... then their attitude changes.”

P5 recalled being treated as invisible in the classroom,

“I was skipped by the teacher... I wasn’t asked for my name... it was like I was not important.”

P3 also described moments when her Somali identity became highly visible, especially when she was the first second-generation Somali woman in Finland to achieve a PhD, which she experienced as empowering rather than negative.

P4 on the other hand did not see much discrimination in the banking sector but did agree that racism was more prevalent in other areas and in his life prior to that, particularly in school. These experiences demonstrate that visibility never necessarily led to blatant exclusion, but it frequently influenced the perception of participants, their evaluation, as well as the need to defend themselves.

Despite differences in experiences of discrimination, belonging was defined in very similar ways across participants. Belonging was not simply about being employed, but rather about being recognized, respected, and defended. P1 described belonging as,

“People seeing that I’m actually doing my work, people appreciating me.”

Similarly, P3 said that belonging implied seeing, respecting, inviting, and defending when necessary. In the case of P4, belonging was related to the trust and support of the supervisors,

“I have received a lot of support and encouragement from my immediate supervisor.”

This shows that professional belonging depends more on everyday relationships and recognition than on formal inclusion alone.

4.4 Role of Community and Networks

Another common theme among all the participants was support systems and networks. Repeatedly characterized as essential to career development were family, mentors, colleagues and professional networks. P2 added that networking and professional associations played a key role,

“We share job opportunities and help each other.”

P3 highlighted how colleagues who “see your potential and open doors” were decisive in her career.

P5 described how teachers, mentors, and even his wife’s friends made it possible for him to continue studying while working and raising children,

“This made me realize that networking and having supportive people around you were crucial.”

Even P4, who described himself as largely independent, emphasized the importance of supervisor support and training opportunities.

All participants shared critical opinions about Finnish integration and employment services. Even those who succeeded felt these systems lacked enough practical or personalized support. P1, who works in social services, said,

“They tell you to apply to these jobs and then send you away... they don’t teach people how to apply.”

P4 said directly,

“The integration entities didn’t support me at all... I was on my own and looked for work.”

Additionally, P5 stated that outside of language classes, the employment office had “no tangible contribution” to his integration.

On the other hand, participants emphasized that networking, personal planning, and informal support were far more successful than any of these services.

5 Conclusion

When we set out to do this study, we had sought answers to three questions. Through semi structured interviews on 5 different Somali professionals in various fields namely banking, social services, a medical doctor, a senior researcher holding a doctoral degree and an

entrepreneur serving as a higher education teacher, we obtained interesting answers to our questions. We can happily state that we have achieved the goal of this study.

The first question was how do Somali background professionals in Finland balance cultural identity and professional integration? A recurring answer they all gave was that they did not see their culture or identity and background as a liability but rather a strength they could rely on. The participants overwhelmingly stated that they are proud of their identity and instead of abandoning it, showcase it in their professional environments. One participant highlighted that having a different background than that of the native population is a highly sought after trait by employers. This is because the employee of such a background brings to the table language expertise, cultural richness, and creative ways of solving problems in workspaces. This aligns with the findings of Shalene and Charlotte (2018, 187-191) stating that identity and background are not just diversity markers but active contributors to workplace outcomes.

The second question investigated the barriers Somali background professionals faced in employment, education, and entrepreneurship. Only one participant in this research recalled vivid experiences of discrimination targeted towards him because of his background in educational institutions by his teacher. However, just like the rest of the participants, he said that he relied on resilience, patience, adaptability, keen sense of community and kinship, honor and dignity, traits that were consistently highlighted by the participants. Although they all stated that they faced challenges because of their identity, just like many other people of immigrant backgrounds in Finland, pride in their identity was the key factor that gave them the strength to shatter the obstacles. Somalis are extremely proud of their identity, not out of arrogance but rather because of a sense of self-respect towards oneself and seeing themselves as no lesser than anyone else. They have no history of being enslaved or subjugated. This is highlighted by Jardine (1923, 29) noting that Somalis were remarkably resistant to cultural erosion even under colonial pressure and continues to describe them as “immune against the demoralizing force of denationalisation,” a phrase that despite its colonial framing points to a strong sense of cultural identity and resilience. Additionally, the participants altogether said that they tapped on the strong family and community support their fellow Somalis provided them with whenever they encountered obstacles.

The third and final question inquired how social services could use this knowledge to improve support for immigrant professionals. Majority of the participants of this study were born in Finland and had no exposure to the integration authorities and services. The rest highlighted that they received little to no support from these services as the bureaucracy was complicated, especially in the employment and economic development services. They instead relied on their perseverance by knocking on doors and sending applications to obtain employment. When we asked the participants for suggestions for improving the integration process, they overwhelmingly said that it is important to consider the wishes and skills of the

person and involve them in planning the integration program. Additionally, empowering and tapping into the strengths and potential of the individual was a constant recommendation by them.

Lastly, when we asked them for some advice for an immigrant background individual, a recurring answer was to be brave in the face of obstacles, learn the local language, explore entrepreneurship and lastly to obtain formal education while knowing the market demand before committing to a certain degree. From this, we can conclude that social services and integration entities ought to empower the individual by including them in the planning phase, be realistic on what they can achieve and the opportunities at hand in regard to education or employment. While doing all this, the integration plan could be separated into two parts, the near future goals and the further ones. This is consistent with the empowerment theory which Zimmerman (2000, 43-49) claims empowerment being a participatory process in which individuals gain control over decisions affecting their lives through involvement in goal setting and problem-solving, while progress is understood as developing over time rather than through immediate outcomes.

To conclude, to our knowledge, no prior study has specifically examined Somali-background professionals in Finland in this way. We dug through hundreds of theses hoping to find a similar study but with no luck. We hope our exploration was interesting enough to warrant further studies on this subject. We also hope that it can be of use to other researchers, policy makers, integration authorities, social services and anyone eager to learn about Somali professionals. We wish more studies are done on immigrant populations to highlight not just the struggles they face in a host country, but their resilience, endurance and perseverance when faced with hardships. This will help the concerned entities to understand the mentality of these immigrant groups rather than seeing them as vulnerable victims.

6 Discussion

In this study, the authors investigated how Somali- background practitioners in Finland perceive their professional lives, the identity navigation, and how support systems and discrimination influence their career pathways. The interviews revealed that education and ability were only some of the factors that influenced professional success, and that identity, representation, networks, and barriers in the system also had a role in professional success. When analyzed in terms of the ethical and social work concept of Banks (2021) and the principles of dignity and social justice defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW 2018), a specific pattern can be identified: Somali professionals are not mere employees in Finnish society, but symbolic representatives of their community.

Across all participants, a strong sense of responsibility toward the Somali community was evident. P3 said that her success was not only hers but also about Somali people in general, saying that she felt the pressure to do better because “my success is viewed on Somalis as a whole”. In a similar manner, P2 explained that the Somali and Muslim culture influenced her professional values by means of collective responsibility and serving other people. P5 also made his education process seem like a project he was creating not for his own benefit, but for his children and his community. These experiences align closely with Banks (2021) argument that ethical recognition requires seeing individuals as full agents rather than stereotypes. Nevertheless, the stories of these participants indicate that Somali professionals are frequently put in a situation where they must continuously demonstrate their value, not just to themselves, but to their entire group.

Such metaphorical weight was particularly evident in experiences of individual participants where they felt questioned or visible at work. P2 explained her experiences when colleagues and patients were doubting her professionalism until they noticed that she was fluent in Finnish. P5 also remembered how he was neglected and disregarded by a teacher who thought that he did not deserve to pursue higher education. P3 already reported that she had been discriminated against in day-care environments, when she did not feel belonged among other colleagues. These experiences demonstrate violations of dignity and social justice, which IFSW (2018) outlines as the situation in which minority professionals are not given the same presumption of competence or belonging as others. Instead of them being dealt with as individuals, they are typically filtered through racial and cultural assumptions.

At the same time the data indicated a high level of resilience and agency. Participants actively worked out the strategies which should be used to navigate professional spaces. P1 emphasized the importance of asking questions and being honest about what one does not know. Asking questions was also another identified strength of P3 in terms of professional skills. P2 was based on communication, advocacy, and networking, whereas P5 applied strict planning, time management, and self-discipline to overcome systemic and personal barriers. These approaches are an indication of what Banks (2021) refers to as empowerment in practice in which people are the ones who create their own paths regardless of the structures.

Support systems played a decisive role in enabling professional success. Family, mentors, colleagues, and professional networks were consistently described as crucial. P2 emphasized the impact of her parents and professional networks, whereas P3 gave credit to open-minded colleagues and mentors who provided her with an opportunity in research and academia. P4 cited that he had supervisors that took the initiative to help him develop his career in banking and P5 mentioned that he had teachers, student unions, and friends to help him through the tough times of studying and working. These results strengthen the idea that social inclusion is

not merely contained in formal access to education or work, but goes as far as being recognized, encouraged, and supported at institutions.

In contrast, integration and employment services were often described as insufficient. P1 noticed that clients are referred to seeking employment without receiving practical skills like writing a CV or language skills. Both P4 and P5 said that they had pursued education and worked without significant assistance from employment offices. This highlights a gap between institutional intentions and lived realities. From an ethical standpoint, this contradicts IFSW's (2018) emphasis on social justice and equal access to opportunities, especially for minority and migrant populations.

Belonging emerged as a deeply relational concept. P1 defined belonging as being regarded, valued, and appreciated by colleagues and supervisors. P3 determined belonging is respected and defended when necessary. P2 said that to her, belonging meant that she was accepted wholly as she was able to put on her hijab and practice her faith by praying at her workplace without discrimination. These statements demonstrate that belonging in work life does not only mean having a job title and responsibilities, but in being respected and appreciated regardless of the cultural or religious differences.

In general, the results reveal that, Somali-background professionals or Somalis in general use a mix of ambition, resilience, and strategic effort to navigate their life, usually in a situation where there is little institutional support. The participants continuously discussed how they took initiative by themselves through education, networking and never giving up rather than relying on the existing systems.

These patterns can be interpreted with reference to historical narratives that explain Somali identity as being linked with persistence, aspiration, and ingenuity. According to Jardine there are long histories of Somali success in the foreign countries, which seem to be driven by a sense of determination and adaptability, which seem to shape how modern Somali professionals navigate structural obstacles to achieve success (Jardine 1923).

Being authors of Somali background ourselves, we knew beforehand that our positionality might affect not only the research process but also interpretation of findings. Having a common cultural background with the participants gave a deeper depth of understanding and trust, although it meant that constant reflexivity was needed so that the analysis was not done in an uncritical manner with the participants based on their personal experiences. During the research, we were aware of our dual identity as writers and members of the community. We consciously attempted to put on our academic hats to base our interpretation on the data, theory and methodology principles as opposed to our assumptions.

Reading the stories of the participants automatically sparked our recollections of what we have experienced in our lives. The narratives of finding a way around professional environments, proving skills, and finding a place of belonging in unfamiliar spaces were not new. Nonetheless, instead of letting this familiarity led to bias, it made us more sensitive to subtlety and difficulty within the information. We repeatedly challenged our understandings and re-read transcripts and made sure that our conclusions were complemented by the same patterns across the interviews and not by our ideas.

At the same time, both our experience and the experiences of the participants underscore a high degree of resilience. Resilience was found to not be denial of structural issues but was instead an active procedure of persistence, strategic work, and self-belief. Notably, the participants, as well as the authors, did not feel victimized by circumstances. Rather, identity and cultural background was perceived as an asset of power, respect and inspiration. This standpoint does not refute the presence of discrimination and structural obstacles; instead, it focuses on agency amid the constraints.

In practical terms, the results of this research provide several implications to social services providers who deal with immigrant populations. To begin with, the integration and employment services might be supplemented with more customized counseling that would take into account the skills, ambitions, and professional experience of immigrant professionals. Second, the availability of professional pathways could be enhanced through enhancing mentoring and networking of the immigrant professionals with Finnish institutions. Lastly, social services professionals can be significant in endorsing culturally sufficient career counseling by acknowledging the significance of cultural recognition, communal affiliation, and fortitude as assets and not burdens. The insights gained through their application in practice may aid in establishing more welcoming employment support regimes and enhance the process of professional integration of immigrant-background people in Finland.

Carrying out this study consequently enhanced our professional competence in various aspects. It deepened our appreciation of the qualitative research that is reflexive, helped us to better distinguish between personal experience and analytical reasoning, and helped us to better appreciate the necessity of basing interpretations on evidence and theory. The process revealed that being close to a research subject can be an advantage and a liability. In the end, not only did this research produce knowledge on the topic of Somali-background professionals in Finland but also helped us as researchers to grow into reflexive and ethically conscious individuals.

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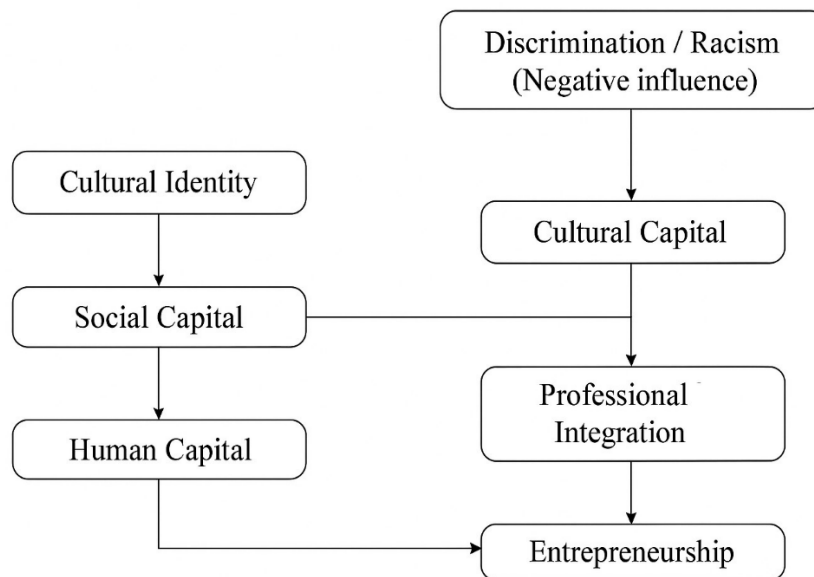
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Appendix 1: Information sheet

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Appendix 1 Information letter

INFORMATION NOTE ON THE THESIS

The Intersection of Identity and Professional Integration: A Study of Somali Professionals in Finland.

Request to participate in a thesis

You are invited to participate in a thesis with the aim of exploring how Somali-background professionals in Finland balance their cultural identity with processes of professional integration in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. We have assessed that you are suitable to participate in the thesis because you are a Somali-background professional living and working in Finland and can offer valuable insights based on your personal experiences.

This information sheet describes the thesis and your contribution to it. After reading this leaflet, you will have the opportunity to ask questions about the thesis, after which you will be asked for your consent to participate in the thesis.

Volunteering

Participation in the thesis is entirely voluntary. Refusal will not affect your rights, your position in your workplace, your membership in any community, or your relationship with Suomen Somaliopiskelijat ry or Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

You can also withdraw or suspend your participation at any time without giving a reason. If you drop out, the data and samples collected about you up to that point may be used as part of the thesis material.

Purpose of the thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the experiences of Somali-background professionals in Finland regarding cultural identity and professional integration. The outcomes are expected to develop knowledge on the obstacles and facilitators influencing the integration, including discrimination, qualification recognition, and support services, and come up with recommendations which can advance the practice of providing employment advice, social services, and professional inclusion.

Methods and measures used in the thesis

Participation in the thesis requires taking part in an individual semi-structured interview.

- The interview will last approximately 30–60 minutes.
- It will take place either face-to-face or online (Teams/Zoom), depending on your preference.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.
- If you do not wish to be recorded, written notes will be taken instead.

The thesis will be carried out using qualitative research methods, focusing on semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis.

Potential benefits of the thesis

Although participation does not bring direct personal benefits, the thesis may contribute to improved understanding and development of culturally sensitive employment and integration services. Your participation may also help strengthen representation and visibility of Somali-background professionals in academic and policy discussions

Possible disadvantages and inconveniences of the thesis

The interview may involve discussing sensitive topics such as discrimination or professional challenges, which could cause temporary emotional discomfort. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.

Costs and reimbursement

There is no cost for you to participate in the thesis. There will also be no monetary compensation for your participation. Travel expenses will not be reimbursed.

Participant's insurance cover

Not applicable. The thesis does not involve physical activity or risks requiring special insurance coverage.

Communicating the results of the thesis

Participants can request a summary of the thesis findings once the work is completed.

The thesis will be published openly on the Theseus database.

Disposal and possible further use of the thesis material

The material will not be used or made available to others. The data will be destroyed no later than six months after the thesis has been completed.

Additional information

If you have any questions concerning the thesis, please contact the thesis author/thesis supervisor.

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Titles: Supervisors

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Appendix 2: Consent Form

Consent of the participant in the thesis

Title of thesis: The Intersection of Identity and Professional Integration: A Study of Somali Professionals in Finland

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I (your name) have been asked to participate in the above-mentioned thesis, which is to explore how Somali-background professionals in Finland experience and navigate cultural identity in relation to their professional lives.

I have received and understood the information about the thesis. I have received adequate information about the thesis, its purpose and implementation, my rights and the possible benefits and risks of participation. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received adequate answers to all my questions about the thesis.

I have been informed about the collection, processing and disclosure of personal data that may be involved in the thesis and have had the opportunity to consult the thesis' privacy statement.

My participation in the thesis is voluntary. I have not been pressured or tempted to participate in the thesis.

I have had sufficient time to consider my participation in the thesis.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent at any time without giving any reason. I am aware that if I discontinue my participation (I may continue to do so at a later stage), the data collected up to the time of discontinuation may be used for the purposes of the thesis.

I have been informed about and agreed to the possible further use or storage of the thesis data in a data archive.

My signature confirms my participation in this thesis.

I confirm my consent to the processing of my personal data as described in the privacy policy.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Initials: _____

The original signed participant's consent and a copy of the thesis statement with its annexes will remain in the thesis worker's file. The original copy of the signed consent form and the original thesis statement with its annexes will be given to the participants.