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Cultural Perceptions on Multinational Construction Sites in Sweden

Master's Thesis in Design and Construction Project Management

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Abstract

The Swedish construction sector increasingly relies on an international workforce, bringing unique challenges to project management. Moving beyond traditional frameworks that view diversity solely through national differences, this study investigates why various project participants interpret identical work situations in fundamentally contrasting ways and how these divergent perceptions shape site reality. Using an interpretivist approach and an exploratory qualitative case study design, this research utilizes twenty-one semi-structured interviews with both native and migrant top management, site supervisors, blue-collar workers and trade union representatives. The data was analysed through a dynamic framework examining the intersection of national, occupational, and organizational cultural layers. The findings indicate that primary challenges stem not from national origins, but from conflicting ways of perceiving everyday professional reality. Project participants attribute vastly different meanings to hierarchy, communication, safety, and individual responsibility. Furthermore, the study uncovers a distinct decoupling between institutionalized procedures and practical site realities driven by productivity pressure. This fragmentation is reinforced by extensive subcontracting chains and job insecurity, which systematically silence vulnerable workers. To address these challenges, this thesis translates these insights into actionable recommendations for managerial actors. It outlines concrete strategies to bridge perceptual gaps – such as implementing verification-based, visual communication, integrating subcontracted foremen into project governance, creating neutral reporting channels, and cultivating a unified project identity through team-building practices. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that managing multicultural teams requires moving past rigid administrative compliance toward developing mutual understanding and operational trust.

Keywords: cultural perceptions, multinational construction sites, foreign workers, Swedish construction industry, organisational decoupling

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Table of contents

1.	Introduction	1
1.1	Aim of the study and research questions.....	2
2.	Background	3
2.1	Development of the Swedish construction industry.....	3
2.2	The emergence of migrant workforce	4
2.3	Management models and work organisation in Swedish construction sector.....	6
3.	Methods.....	9
3.1	Research design and strategy	9
3.2	Literature review	10
3.3	Interview study.....	10
3.4	Limitations	12
3.5	Ethical considerations and reliability	13
3.6	Sustainability.....	14
3.7	Use of AI	14
4.	Literature Review.....	15
4.1	National lens: The impact of upbringing.....	16
4.1.1	Power distance and perception of hierarchy.....	16
4.1.2	Individualism vs collectivism: openness or conflict?	17
4.1.3	Masculine or feminine.....	17
4.1.4	Uncertainty avoidance and attitudes toward risk	18
4.1.5	Communication, language and misinterpretation.....	19
4.2	Occupational lens: Professional identity	20
4.2.1	Subcultures in an organisation	20
4.2.2	Office vs the field	21
4.2.3	‘Macho’ culture, position in the hierarchy and risk-taking.....	22
4.3	Organisational lens: Workplace culture	22
4.3.1	Schein’s model of organisational culture	22
4.3.2	The paradox of formal structure: Decoupling	23
4.3.3	Role of trust in an organisation	23
4.4	Summary of theoretical framework.....	24
5.	Results	25
5.1	Perceptions of hierarchy and workplace relationships	25
5.1.1	Flat hierarchy and top-down systems.....	25
5.1.2	Nordic management model and tensions.....	26

5.1.3	Adaptation and integration into the Swedish work model	27
5.1.4	Competence, stereotypes and workplace recognition	30
5.2	Communication and understanding on multicultural construction sites	30
5.2.1	Language barriers and exclusion	31
5.2.2	Different communication styles and expectations	33
5.3	Formal procedures and everyday work	34
5.3.1	Organisational control between compliance and practice	35
5.3.2	Organisational protection and unequal workplace realities	37
5.3.3	Productivity pressure and risk-taking	39
6.	Discussion	42
6.1	Perceptions shaped by national culture	42
6.1.1	Communication as a cultural filter	42
6.1.2	Power distance in practice	43
6.1.3	Trust, ‘spontaneous sociability’ and invisible barriers	44
6.1.4	Two definitions of trust	44
6.2	Perceptions shaped by occupational culture	45
6.2.1	The ‘macho’ shield and reporting culture	45
6.2.2	Heroism vs procedure	46
6.2.3	When role outweighs nationality	47
6.3	Perceptions shaped by organisational culture	48
6.3.1	The Bureaucratic Theatre	48
6.3.2	Manipulation of rules and systemic decoupling	48
6.3.3	Project-based fragmentation and cultural layers	50
7.	Recommendations	51
8.	Conclusion	53
	References	56

1. Introduction

The modern construction industry operates in an environment characterised by increasing globalisation, workforce mobility and the growing complexity of projects. This is particularly evident in Northern European countries, where labour shortages and demographic changes have led to an increased proportion of migrant workers in the construction sector (OECD, 2022; Arbetsförmedlingen, 2023). However, the growing diversity of construction teams affects not only the structure of employment but also the way work is organised, and projects are managed. Construction projects are among the most complex working environments. They require the simultaneous coordination of numerous participants in the investment process, working under time pressure, and operating in high-risk conditions (Winch, 2010; ILO, 2021). In practice, this means the need for daily collaboration between employees representing different languages, professional experiences and ways of working. In such conditions, project success depends not only on technical competencies, but also on the quality of communication, the level of trust, and the ability to cooperate between groups operating within different organisational and national cultures.

These challenges are particularly significant from a project management perspective. Modern construction project management has evolved beyond controlling schedules, costs, and quality; it now demands the active management of social relations, communication and cross-cultural cooperation. Today, project managers must function not just as technical overseers, but as mediators between diverse professional and cultural groups. In a multicultural environment, even seemingly simple workplace situations can lead to tensions arising from differing expectations regarding hierarchy, communication, responsibility or decision-making processes.

Despite the growing body of research on labour migration and workplace safety, the social dimension of multicultural construction sites in Sweden remains relatively under-explored, particularly in terms of its practical implications for construction project management. Previous research has not paid much attention to the day-to-day interactions between project participants or to how culture influences the interpretation of various aspects of working life. Yet it is precisely these everyday workplace practices that have a direct impact on project effectiveness, worker safety and the quality of collaboration between teams.

This study is driven by both personal and practical motivations. As Polish nationals with links to the construction industry, the authors have had the opportunity to observe the functioning of

multicultural work environments from the perspective of both migrants and companies operating within the Swedish construction sector. Notably, distinct groups of project participants often interpret identical workplace situations in contrasting ways. The study does not seek to identify who is responsible for organisational problems, nor to present one culture as superior to another. Instead, it proceeds from the premise that conflicts and misunderstandings frequently arise from the structural overlap of different value systems, professional experiences, and organisational models.

1.1 Aim of the study and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine how stakeholders perceive work practices on multicultural construction sites in Sweden and to understand why these perceptions differ. By analysing the interplay between national, professional and organisational cultures, the study seeks to explain divergent interpretations of the same work situations and their impact on communication and collaboration.

This research addresses a gap in the Swedish construction industry, where the social dynamics and conflicting cultural perceptions within work environments remain underexplored. By applying established cultural frameworks to this context, the study provides an analytical contribution to the field while simultaneously offering practical guidance. The resulting recommendations are designed to support project managers, site managers, health and safety specialists, and organizations coordinating international teams or main contractor-subcontractor relationships, in order to improve collaboration, strengthen work organisation, and enhance safety and communication in multicultural project environments. To delineate this thesis, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. How do different stakeholders perceive everyday work practices and interactions on multicultural construction sites in Sweden?
2. What types of misunderstandings or conflicts arise from these differences in perception?
3. To what extent can the differences in these perceptions be explained through the lenses of national, professional and organisational cultures?
4. What lessons can be drawn to improve communication, collaboration and work organisation in multicultural construction teams?

2. Background

Migrant workers are now an integral part of the Swedish construction sector (Statistics Sweden, 2022). Their presence is the result of long-term economic and demographic changes that have led to a shortage of domestic labour and increased worker mobility in Europe (OECD, 2022). To better understand the role of migrant workers in the Swedish construction industry, it is important to examine the broader context of the industry's operations. This chapter will present the conditions that have led to the inflow of migrant workers, as well as the specific characteristics of the construction sector itself. Discussions will also focus on who migrant workers actually are – that is, which countries they come from, what factors drive them to leave their home country and what influences their decision to stay in Sweden. In addition, special attention will be given to the challenges migrant workers face while living outside their country of origin, starting with the barriers associated with finding work abroad and ending with adapting to a new and demanding professional environment.

2.1 Development of the Swedish construction industry

The development of the construction sector in Sweden began with the economic and social transformations that took place in the country starting in the mid-19th century. Between 1860 and 1960, Sweden transformed from a predominantly agricultural country into a highly industrialized one. After the end of World War II, Sweden experienced a period of strong economic growth, which further accelerated urbanization and infrastructure development. As a result, the following decades were characterized by a high demand for labour in the construction sector (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

These historical developments created the foundation for the contemporary Swedish construction industry, which today depends heavily on a stable and skilled workforce. At the same time, the sector is facing new challenges. This historical formation of the sector created the foundations of the contemporary Swedish construction industry, which is currently heavily dependent on a stable and skilled workforce. At the same time, the sector is currently facing increasing challenges related to labour shortages (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Approximately 61,000 workers are lacking across various professions (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2023). This shortage includes occupations such as civil engineers, construction technicians, roofers and ventilation and plumbing installers. In addition, the situation is expected to worsen in the coming years, also because approximately 10% of the construction workforce is projected

to retire by 2028, further increasing demand for labour (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2022). Consequently, the domestic workforce alone is insufficient to meet the needs of the market (European Commission, 2020).

2.2 The emergence of migrant workforce

The increasing reliance on migrant workers in the Swedish construction sector can be understood as a consequence of both long-term demographic changes and historical migration patterns. As a result, migrant workers have begun to play an increasingly significant role in industry. However, this phenomenon is part of a much broader historical context, as Sweden has a long and complex history of migration (European Commission, 2020).

Migrants were already arriving in Sweden as far back as the Middle Ages, and one of the largest groups during that period consisted of German merchants and artisans who settled in commercial towns. In later centuries, Sweden also experienced emigration, and as a result, between 1850 and 1930, approximately 1.17 million Swedes left the country in search of better living conditions (Barton, 1994). According to Harrison (2009), changes in migration occurred gradually after World War II. With its dynamic economic growth, Sweden began to attract workers from other countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, migrants from Finland, Southern Europe, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia became an important part of the workforce, especially in industry and construction (Sweden.se, n.d.). Since the 1980s, migration has increasingly included refugees from regions affected by conflicts, such as the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. A key milestone for labour mobility was Sweden's accession to the Schengen Area in 2001, which enabled the free movement of people between European Union member states. As a result, there was an increase in the number of workers from other EU countries who could take up employment in Sweden without the need to obtain a work permit (Sweden.se, n.d.).

As a result, migration is now a significant component of the demographic structure, while also influencing the composition of workforces in Sweden's construction sector. Major construction projects are carried out by teams composed of workers of various national origins and with diverse professional backgrounds (Sweden.se, n.d.). According to Arbetsmiljöverket (2024), migrant workers in this sector come mainly from Central and Eastern European countries, such as Germany, Poland and Lithuania. However, it is worth noting that this diversity applies not only to the workers' origins but also to their forms of employment and mobility. From a labour market perspective, several types of migrant workers can be identified, although their classification is not straightforward. In the sources, migrants are referred to, among other terms,

as posted workers, temporary or circular migrants, and long-term or permanent migrants (Career Support, n.d.; European Commission, n.d.; ILO, 2015; OECD, n.d.; United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.). The first group includes posted workers, i.e., those employed by companies in other countries but temporarily performing work in a foreign country (European Commission, n.d.). The second group presents temporary or circular migrants, who take up work abroad for a limited period, often as part of repeated migration cycles (ILO, 2015). The third category consists of long-term or permanent migrants, who are integrated into the local labour market (OECD, n.d.; United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.).

The diverse forms of employment and situations faced by migrant workers are linked to varied reasons for working abroad. One of the most common reasons for coming to Sweden remains economic considerations, such as higher wages, better working conditions and greater job stability compared to their countries of origin (Friberg, 2012). In addition to economic factors, there are also broader conditions related to the attractiveness of the Swedish labour market. Sweden is a country that offers a high standard of living, access to a well-developed healthcare system, education and extensive social benefits. It makes it perceived as a stable country conducive to long-term employment. Another significant factor is the extremely high level of job security and the emphasis on compliance with labour standards and wages (Migrationsverket, 2023). Also, important positive aspect is the method of employment through staffing agencies, which often provide more predictable conditions and opportunities for skill development. Another equally effective way to find employment is through social networks, such as family and friends. This makes it easier for migrant workers to move to a new country, adapt to an unfamiliar environment and feel a greater sense of security associated with a recommended workplace (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003).

At the same time, it is important to remember that the experiences of migrant workers may also vary depending on their legal and institutional status. European Union citizens enjoy the freedom of movement, which allows them relatively easy access to the labour market in Sweden. In contrast, workers from outside the EU are subject to more restrictive regulations. They are required to obtain a work permit before taking up employment. However, obtaining such a permit typically involves having a job offer that meets specific standards for wages and working conditions, as well as additional administrative procedures. These differences affect not only the ability to find work in Sweden but also the level of job stability and the degree of integration into the Swedish labour market (Migrationsverket, n.d.).

Despite the benefits, working abroad, at the same time, comes with significant challenges. Migrant workers often face language barriers, limited knowledge of local regulations and difficulties adapting to a new environment (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025). Moreover, the construction sector is inherently high-risk and is associated with a large number of accidents and injuries (Newaz et al., 2025). In this context, providing adequate support for workers becomes essential. Trade unions play a key role in protecting workers from abuse and ensuring the right working conditions (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 2000). In the construction, Byggnads plays a special role. It is actively combating unfair practices and striving to ensure equal employment conditions for all workers regardless of their background (Byggnads, n.d.).

The presence of migrant workers and the diversity of their migration patterns directly influence the functioning of the labour market and the organisation of work in the construction sector. On the one hand, it allows for greater flexibility in responding to fluctuating labour demand and helps to mitigate shortages caused by demographic changes, such as an aging workforce. On the other hand, it introduces new challenges related to communication, coordination and differences in working cultures (Werner, 1996). From the employer's perspective, the use of migrant labour can also be explained by economic considerations. Recruitment of foreign workers is often perceived as a cost-efficient solution. Buckley (2012) argues that 'recruitment of foreign workers due to shortages in domestic labour tends to be an attractive alternative for employer's, because of the low production costs in times of economic boom. Plus, when the economy cools down, it is far easier to lay off foreign construction migrants'. Therefore, understanding the role of migrant workers requires the broader organisation of the construction sector.

To analyse how such diverse teams function on a daily basis, it is necessary to understand how work on construction sites is organised and what organisational structures shape the course of construction projects in Sweden.

2.3 Management models and work organisation in Swedish construction sector

The construction sector plays a vital role in modern economies. Although there are organisational differences between countries, it shares many structural characteristics at the same time (ILO, 2015). Sweden is not an exception. The Swedish construction industry accounts for approximately 6% of employment and GDP, underscoring its importance to the functioning of the country's entire economy (Arnholtz & Ibsen, 2021). At the same time, this

sector is characterized by high dependence on the economic situation, seasonality and project-based nature of the work. These characteristics have a direct impact on how work is organised and how human resources are managed (Ahlstrand, 2022).

One of the fundamental characteristics of the construction industry is its project-based nature as mentioned above. This means that teams are formed on a temporary basis to carry out specific projects. Unlike many other sectors, people working in construction rarely stay with one employer or team permanently. The composition of teams and the companies involved in a project changes depending on the stage of its implementation (Winch, 2010). As Stinchcombe (1959) points out, construction differs from the manufacturing industry in that the distinction between work planning and execution is not as clearly defined. In practice, this means that blue-collar workers have more influence over the performance of their tasks, which gives them greater autonomy. However, this also makes it difficult to implement standardized and repeatable organisational solutions. A key element of work organisation in the Swedish construction industry is the system based on the main contractor-subcontractor relationship (Cremers, 2011; Ahlstrand, 2022). This means that a single construction project involves multiple specialized companies responsible for specific stages of implementation, ranging from groundwork and installations to the finishing works (Eccles, 1981; ILO, 2021). However, this structure leads to significant fragmentation of the construction process. As Riazi et al. (2020) point out, fragmentation occurs at various levels. Starting from the internal level among project participants, such as clients, designers and main contractors, and extending to the external level (for example, relations with public institutions). As a result, responsibility for project implementation is spread across many different parties, which increases the importance of effective team management.

Another distinctive aspect of the construction sector in Sweden is the remarkably high level of regulation regarding workplace safety. Due to the high risks associated with construction site work, occupational safety and health issues are one of the key elements of work organisation. Safety procedures are formalized and strictly enforced. Compliance with these procedures includes the use of personal protective equipment, regular training and daily safety briefings. Safety is therefore not treated only as a legal requirement but as an integral part of project management and organisational culture (Ahlstrand, 2022). This aspect is also closely linked to the high importance of documentation and formal requirements. Work organisation in the Swedish construction industry is based on the necessity of meeting specific standards and possessing appropriate qualifications confirmed by certificates. Employees are required to have

documentation confirming completion of specific training courses. As a result, access to work and the ability to perform specific tasks are strongly dependent on meeting formal requirements (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2024).

In addition, the construction sector is characterized by high time pressure. It is caused by the need to complete project phases by specific deadlines and the interdependence between work phases. A delay in one phase directly affects the project schedule and consequently – the costs of delays or penalties for missing deadlines (ILO, 2021; Winch, 2010). In practice, it means that all project participants operate in an environment that requires rapid decision-making and adaptation to dynamically changing working conditions (Ahlstrand, 2022).

The way work is organised in Sweden is also influenced by the management model characteristic of Scandinavian countries. It is based on flat organisational structures, trust and shared decision-making (Grenness, 2003; Andersen & Rasmussen, 2014). In this model, employees are treated as partners rather than just executors. This fosters greater autonomy and responsibility among teams. Therefore, decisions are made together, as a team. However, it results in a longer overall decision-making process. This model differs significantly from more traditional management systems found in other European countries, which are based on a strong hierarchy and clear division of roles between supervisors and employees (Hofstede, 2001).

As a result, construction sites in Sweden function as complex work environments. They bring together various organisational models, economic interests and management styles (Ahlstrand, 2022; Riazi et al., 2020). Projects are carried out by teams composed of workers with diverse national backgrounds, professional experience and expectations regarding work organisation (Arnholtz & Ibsen, 2021). In such environments, effective management of collaboration between teams becomes crucial.

3. Methods

This chapter presents describes how the steps of the study were conducted and what research methods were used. It also highlights considerations and limitations surrounding this thesis.

3.1 Research design and strategy

This study is based on an interpretivist approach, which means that social reality is seen as something constructed by participants through their experiences and interpretations. An exploratory qualitative case study was used in this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Its aim was to understand how workers and managers perceive daily work practices on multicultural construction sites in Sweden. The analysis focused on construction projects carried out in Sweden and included employees from different companies and organisational levels. This topic was chosen because of the growing role of migrant workers in the Swedish construction sector, as well as the complexity of organisational and cultural relationships on construction sites. Additionally, an inductive approach was applied, which means that the research topic and scope were gradually adjusted during the research process.

The research process began with two, very broad in scope, preliminary interviews with blue-collar workers working in the subcontracting company. The purpose of these initial interviews was to identify repeating themes and patterns in the respondents' experiences. A preliminary analysis of the interviews allowed to spot areas that were particularly relevant from a research perspective, such as communication on the construction site, the functioning of the safety system, time pressure and differences in the perception of hierarchy within multicultural teams. Based on these, the thesis topic and the scope of further research were refined. The questions used in subsequent interviews were also gradually developed and adapted to the themes emerging in the respondents' answers. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of analysed phenomena and enabled the exploration of topics that were not initially included in the scope of the study.

Another key element of the strategy was to consider the diverse professional roles and experiences of the respondents. It allowed to collect a range of perspectives on work organisation at construction sites. The respondents included both blue-collar workers performing physical labour on the construction site and those in supervisory and managerial roles. The respondents also represent various types of organisations involved in construction projects, as they are employed by both main contractors and subcontractors, carrying out

specific scopes of work on the projects. In addition, the study included individuals associated with an organisation representing trade unions in Sweden. Diverse experiences related to migration were also taken into account. Respondents included both native workers from Sweden and migrant workers from various countries, such as Poland, Slovakia and Turkey. This allowed for capturing the perspectives of workers from European Union countries and those from outside the EU, whose labour migration processes and labour market situations may differ significantly.

3.2 Literature review

The literature review was searched using database of Chalmers Library and supported by search in Google Scholar and Scopus using keywords related to the topic of the study: *organisational/professional/national culture in construction industry, construction industry in Sweden, communication on multicultural sites, migrant workers, foreign labour in construction, multicultural teams* and so on. The search included scientific articles, journals, reports and book publications. However, the process of developing the literature review was not entirely linear. During the supervision meeting with the supervisor, various possible theoretical approaches were discussed, and it was then suggested that the interview results be examined through a single chosen theoretical ‘lens’. This approach proved to be a very good solution, as it was decided in the beginning to preserve as many of the stories and perspectives gathered in the empirical research as possible, rather than limiting them to a single narrow theme. Together with the supervisor, it was agreed that a particularly interesting direction would be to focus on how different project participants might perceive the same work situations differently and how culture influences these differences. Therefore, the literature was selected to help explain these differences in perception. In the initial stage of the literature search, it was proposed to start with Edgar Schein’s model, which allows for the analysis of organisational culture at various levels. On this basis, the literature research was expanded, and it was decided to use an approach that sees culture as a multi-level concept that influences how project participants understand reality.

3.3 Interview study

The empirical part of the study was conducted as a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allowed the collection of detailed information regarding the participants’ experiences and interpretations of their work. Although the interview guide did not explicitly focus on respondents’ past experiences, participants frequently referred

to these during the interviews, and these answers were included in the analysis. In total, twenty-one interviews were carried out between 19.02.2026 and 24.03.2026, including one conducted with two participants simultaneously (P6 and P7). Participants were recruited through a combination of the authors' existing professional contacts and recommendations from the external supervisors of this thesis. All respondents were employed across multiple construction projects at the time of the study, which allowed for the inclusion of experiences from various organizational contexts and positions within the construction supply chain. The interview sample included representatives of various types of organisations within the construction sector. These comprised one Polish subcontractor (medium-sized), three Swedish main contractors (large-sized), one Slovak subcontractor (small-sized) and three Swedish subcontractors (small-, medium- and large-sized; based on the classification by the European Commission, n.d.). In addition, one large trade union organisation was represented. Whenever possible, interviews were carried out face-to-face, while online interviews were used when in-person meetings were not feasible. The interviews were held in English or Polish, depending on the respondents' preferences. Polish participants were interviewed in their native language – which gave them opportunity to describe their experiences more naturally – while Swedish participants were interviewed in English, which was not their first language. This may have influenced the depth and spontaneity of their responses. Quotations originally provided in Polish were translated into English by the authors. Care was taken to preserve the original meaning, tone and context of the respondent' statements while ensuring linguistic clarity. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed thematically. This process involved multiple transcript readings, data coding, identification of repeating patterns and grouping them into thematic categories. The identified themes were then organised and are presented in the Results chapter. Later in the study, in the Discussion part, the results were interpreted using selected theoretical models. Table 1 includes information regarding the respondents' professional roles, gender, ethnicity, employer, language proficiency and migration status. To preserve the anonymity, identification codes (P1-P21) were used instead of personal data.

Table 1. Information about interviews participants

ID	Role	Ethnicity	Languages spoken	Gender	Current employer	Migration
P1	Rigger, carpenter	Polish	Polish, English	Male	PL subcontractor	Permanent migrant
P2	Foreman, carpenter	Polish	Polish, English	Male	PL subcontractor	Posted worker
P3	Supervisor	Chinese	Chinese, Swedish, English	Female	SE main contractor	Permanent migrant
P4	Project manager	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native

P5	H&S manager	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P6	Supervisor	Polish	Polish, English	Male	PL subcontractor	Posted worker
P7	Supervisor	Polish	Polish, English	Male	PL subcontractor	Posted worker
P8	Carpenter	Polish	Polish, English, Swedish	Male	SE main contractor	Permanent migrant
P9	Trade union representative	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P10	Supervisor	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P11	Project manager	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P12	Foreman	Slovak	Slovak, English	Male	SK subcontractor	Posted worker
P13	Foreman	Polish	Polish, English	Male	SE subcontractor	Posted worker
P14	Senior supervisor	Polish	Polish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Permanent migrant
P15	Foreman, steel fixer	Polish	Polish	Male	PL subcontractor	Permanent migrant
P16	H&S manager	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P17	Work manger	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P18	Region manager	Swedish	Swedish, English	Male	SE main contractor	Native
P19	Site engineer	Turkish	Turkish, Swedish, English	Male	SE subcontractor	Permanent migrant
P20	National coordinator for organizing foreign workers	Polish	Swedish, English, Polish	Female	Trade union	Permanent migrant
P21	Project manager	Swedish	Swedish, English, Finnish	Male	SE subcontractor	Native

3.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting its results. First, the study focuses exclusively on the construction sector in Sweden. Although many of the problems described may also occur in other countries, they cannot be directly generalized. Another limitation concerns the research method. The study is primarily based on qualitative interviews without the inclusion of observations and surveys. Relying solely on interviews means that the results reflect the respondents' experiences and perceptions, and with that there is a risk of response bias. Participants may present situations in a more favourable or, conversely, critical way than experienced in reality. A related limitation is also the possible gap between official statements regarding work organisation, safety and the actual practices employed on construction sites.

The interviews also include uneven representation across nationalities; for example, there was only one respondent from Turkey and one from Slovakia, which does not allow for making meaningful comparisons with participants from similar backgrounds. Additionally, although the study covers migrant workers of various nationalities and employment statuses, the analysis was not intended to compare them in a competing way. Any potential differences resulting from

workers' origins or employment status are not the primary focus of this study. It is also important to note that the scope of the study concentrates primarily on everyday work practices and on how workers and managers perceive work organisation on the construction site. Broader systemic and institutional issues, such as migration policy, recruitment systems or the structure of contracts in the construction industry, are merely touched upon and do not form the main subject of analysis in this study. It should also be emphasized that the data analysis is based on the researchers' interpretation of the respondents' statements. As in the case with qualitative research, a certain degree of interpretive subjectivity is inherent.

It should also be noted that the theoretical framework draws on well-established cultural models, and while these frameworks remain widely used, many of them originate from earlier decades, which may limit their ability to fully capture the dynamics of present multicultural work environments.

3.5 Ethical considerations and reliability

Throughout this study, special attention was paid to ethical considerations. This was important due to the specific nature of the construction sector and the presence of hierarchical relationships. The goal was to ensure the safety and privacy of the participants and to maintain research integrity. In the interview invitations sent by e-mail, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, its scope and how the data shall be used. It was also explained that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without giving a specific reason. Before the interviews began, all participants gave their verbal consent to have the conversations recorded. All data was anonymized to protect participants' identity. Their workplaces were described only in general terms, and participants were assigned identifiers that made it impossible to identify them. It was decided to store the data using secure storage platform and password-protected files, to which only the researchers had access, in line with data protection regulations, including the GDPR. Most interviews were conducted individually, which helped reduce the potential influence of hierarchical relationships and encouraged more open responses. In one case, the interview was conducted with two participants simultaneously; however, they held the same positions within the organisation, which minimized hierarchical pressure. Care was also taken in the presentation of the results to ensure that findings are reported accurately and responsibly, without distorting participants' statements or taking them out of context. Transparency and research integrity were also important. The analysis was based on the interpretation of respondents' statements while being aware of possible bias in

interpretation. The study's limitations and potential sources of bias were clearly identified. The study also addressed issues related to research reliability, replicability and validity. To improve reliability, semi-structured interviews focused on the same key areas. Although some questions were adapted to the respondents' roles and the emerging themes during the study, all interviews focused on the same topics. Replicability was supported through a detailed description of the research process, including participant selection, interview structure and data analysis procedures. Validity was strengthened by including participants representing different roles in construction projects.

3.6 Sustainability

This study contributes primarily to social sustainability by addressing communication, inclusivity and mutual understanding within multicultural construction teams in Sweden. Indirectly, this research may also enhance organisational efficiency and project performance, as it identifies the sources of misunderstandings and examines collaboration practices. The results support sustainable workplaces by giving advice on safer, more equitable and with that more effective working environment.

3.7 Use of AI

In this study, AI-based tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini were used. It was decided to employ them as support in the editorial and organisational processes. They were therefore used as an additional aid, particularly to improve the text stylistics and to check for correct grammar. These tools also helped in organizing the structure of the thesis. As the thesis topic was refined in parallel with the interview process and the subsequent development of the literature review, support was necessary in defining the appropriate scope of the study. The use of these tools in this regard enabled the researchers to organise the content and incorporate relevant themes in a manner consistent with the thesis's subject matter. This avoided the risk of omitting them or linking them inappropriately to the main research process. AI-based tools were also used to support the process of searching for relevant academic literature titles. All selected literature was then carefully read and analysed by the study's authors. It is worth emphasizing that artificial intelligence was not used in the study to generate substantive content. The authors developed all key elements of the study independently. To ensure scientific integrity, all content generated with AI support was verified on a continuous basis. Specifically, when formulating the structure of the study, the researchers independently adapted the suggested ideas to what they considered relevant based on the results of the conducted research.

4. Literature Review

The Swedish construction sector with its increasing internationalization becomes a kind of social laboratory. Traditional views of culture, based solely on a 'Nationality vs Nationality' distinction turn out to be insufficient for explaining the dynamic functioning of modern construction sites. Understanding the phenomena occurring in these multicultural environments requires an interdisciplinary approach (Alvesson, 2002; Erez & Gati, 2004). As Choi et al. (2015) note, while many scholars consider culture a major issue in international construction, and the authors point out the importance of professionals striving to understand others' expectations and beliefs, this awareness still remains limited within the industry.

As Alvesson (2002) states, culture is a 'tricky concept' as it can easily be used to 'cover everything and consequently nothing'. Rather than viewing it merely as a social pattern or a set of surface phenomena, it must be understood as a 'system of common symbols and meanings' (Alvesson, 2011). Culture is not a monolithic entity; it is a 'freezing of social reality' where people subordinate themselves to existing forms and values, often taking certain interests as given (Alvesson, 2002).

This literature review is structured with theories which eventually will be used to explain why different project participants perceive and interpret the same reality in vastly different ways. In an effort to illustrate the complexity of the subject and present it in a multidimensional perspective this study adopts a dynamic, multi-level model (Erez & Gati, 2004), recognizing that an individual's perception is shaped by the overlap of three distinct cultural layers shaped in a complex weave of an individual's upbringing (national culture), education (occupational culture) and workplace environment (organisational culture). These perspectives rest on different epistemological assumptions: Hofstede et al.'s (2010) national culture model is used to capture broad, socially shared patterns and general categorizations of cultural difference, while occupational and organisational culture perspectives are informed by constructivist approaches that view culture as socially produced, continuously negotiated and embedded in everyday practice (Alvesson, 2002). Rather than treating these perspectives as contradictory, this study combines them to capture both the patterned expectations that shape interaction and the situated meanings through which individuals interpret and enact their working environment. By establishing this theoretical base, the study can move from a mere description of behaviours to a deeper explanation of their underlying causes, ultimately showing how these varied

perceptions influence communication, hierarchy, safety and many other aspects showed in subsequent chapters.

4.1 National lens: The impact of upbringing

National culture is one of the factors shaping how people interpret situations and there are many aspects which shape it. What happens on a construction site is never for example just ‘Swedish vs Polish’. Instead, individuals carry cultural patterns that influence how they make sense of work situations (Trajkovski, S., & Loosemore, M. (2006); Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010).

4.1.1 Power distance and perception of hierarchy

Hofstede et al. (2010) propose six dimensions with which nations can be distinguished; however, for the purpose of this study only four dimensions are considered. One of them is power distance, which describes ‘the extent to which the less powerful members [...] expect and accept that power is distributed unequally’. This means that different expectations about authority, communication and decision-making between nations might occur.

In low power distance cultures like Sweden, hierarchy is seen as functional rather than fundamental. Managers and workers are expected to interact more or less as equals. Employees are comfortable approaching their supervisors, questioning decisions and participating in discussions. As Hofstede notes, in these countries there is ‘a preference for consultation [...] and interdependence among boss and subordinate’.

In contrast, in higher power distance cultures, hierarchy is more deeply embedded. Subordinates ‘are unlikely to approach and contradict their bosses directly’ and there is a stronger expectation that decisions come from above. The origins of this behaviour start, when children are taught to be obedient and fundamentally respect their elders, which in the adulthood translates into a need for a ‘father figure’ in a body of a boss or someone with a directly higher position in the company than them. This creates a larger emotional distance between levels of the organisation.

The difference can be presented in an example. Imagine a situation on site. A manager asks if the instructions are clear. And there comes silence, no one says anything. From a Swedish perspective, which might be interpreted as an agreement or understanding, while a worker from a high power distance background might remain silent out of respect or fear. The behaviour looks the same, but the meaning behind it is completely different.

4.1.2 Individualism vs collectivism: openness or conflict?

Another important dimension described by Hofstede et al. (2010) is individualism in the contrary to collectivism. In individualistic cultures, people are expected to take care only of themselves or their close family and express their opinions openly. Speaking up is seen as a sign of honesty and professionalism. As the author mentions, ‘telling the truth about how one feels is characteristic of a sincere and honest person’. In collectivist cultures, the situation is different. People are embedded in strong social groups and maintaining harmony is often more important than expressing disagreement. Direct confrontation can be perceived as rude. Instead of saying ‘no’, people may say ‘we will think about it’ to avoid conflict. In this situation a person from individualistic country might misinterpret it as acceptance of the plan.

Schwartz (2004) describes a similar idea using the concept of autonomy versus embeddedness. In embedded cultures, meaning comes from belonging to a group and maintaining social order. In autonomous cultures, individuals are expected to ‘cultivate and express their own preferences, feelings and ideas’. This has direct consequences for communication on construction sites. What one person sees as clear and efficient communication, another may perceive as aggressive or disrespectful. At the same time, indirect communication may be interpreted as unclear or evasive by those expecting directness. There is also an impact on teamwork. Workers from collectivist backgrounds may rely more on their in-group and feel more comfortable communicating within it. This is supported by Loosemore et al. (2010), who found that many workers believe that ‘their own ethnic group understands them better’ and tend to stick together for support.

4.1.3 Masculine or feminine

The next dimension described by Hofstede et al. (2010) is masculinity-femininity dimension, particularly relevant in construction industry. Masculine cultures emphasize competition, being visible between others, toughness and material success. Boys from young age are being taught not to cry and to ‘fight back when attacked’. This culture has practical consequences. It can discourage workers from admitting mistakes, asking for help or reporting safety issues – because these actions may be seen as weakness. This connects strongly with the well-documented ‘macho’ culture in construction later described in Chapter 4.3. Feminine cultures on the other hand value cooperation and modesty, with safety and quality in life being priorities.

4.1.4 Uncertainty avoidance and attitudes toward risk

Fourth, and the last considered in this study, dimension from Hofstede et al. (2010) is uncertainty avoidance, which describes how comfortable people are with ambiguity and risk. Authors describe high uncertainty-avoidance societies as more ‘anxious cultures’, where ambiguity creates stress or discomfort. But anxiety does not always restrain. As they note, such cultures are often more expressive: it is socially acceptable ‘to raise one’s voice, to show one’s emotions and to pound the table’. At the same time, these cultures tend to seek ways to reduce uncertainty through structure. There is a stronger reliance on rules, formal procedures and expertise – ‘their organisations contain more specialists’. People are more likely to expect that someone with a higher position than them should have the answer.

In contrast, in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, such as Sweden, uncertainty is more easily accepted as part of everyday work. There is less pressure to eliminate ambiguity immediately. Hofstede et al. (2010) note that in such societies ‘there is less of a prevailing sense of urgency’. To add, emotional restraint is more common and strong expressions of frustration or tension may be viewed as inappropriate. Instead of relying heavily on formal rules or authority, there is often more trust in dialogue, improvisation and ‘common sense’. It is acceptable to say *‘I don’t know’* and uncertainty does not necessarily undermine credibility.

The key point is that people respond to the same uncertain situation in fundamentally different ways – both emotionally and practically – and this shapes how they interpret what is happening on site.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the countries across the four dimensions, which will be further analysed in the Discussion chapter.

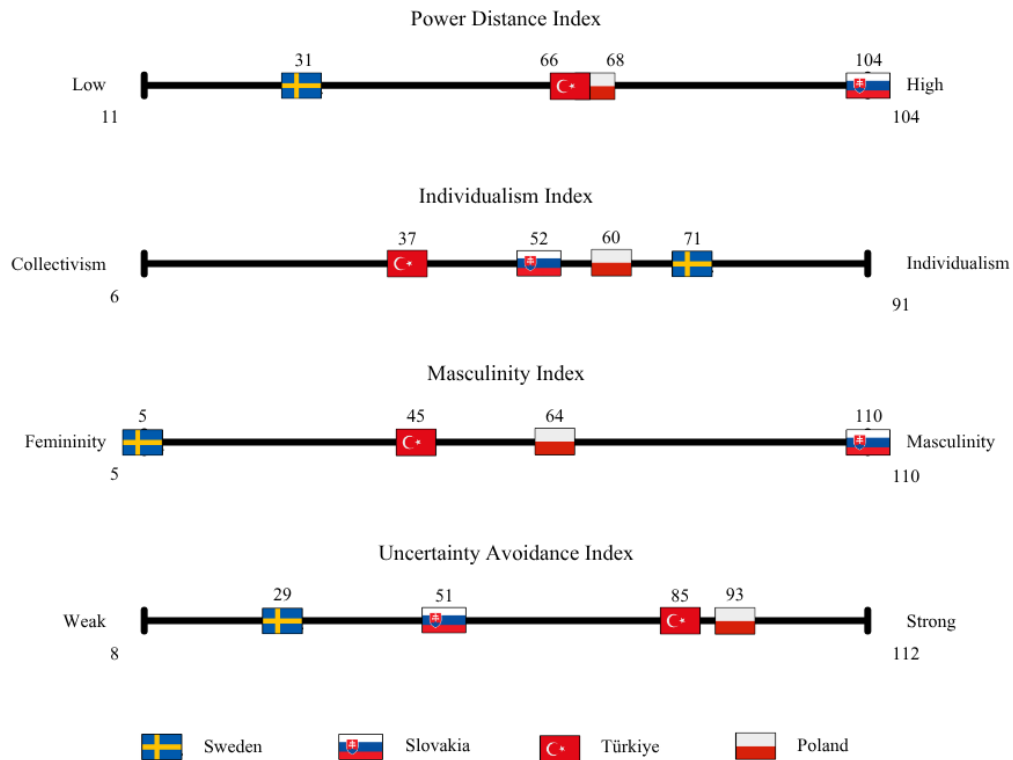


Figure 1. Four Cultural Dimensions. Own elaboration based on Hofstede et al. (2010).

4.1.5 Communication, language and misinterpretation

Hall and Hall (2001), however, divide cultures to high-context and low-context where differences in communication become visible. Low-context cultures (Northern Europe, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, North America, Australia) rely on explicit, direct communication. Information needs to be clearly stated. High-context cultures (Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, The Middle East) rely more on shared understanding and implicit cues. When these styles meet, problems arise. High-context communicators may find low-context communication excessive or even patronizing, while low-context communicators may feel that not enough information is provided. This often leads to low-context cultures relying on more explicit clarification through frequent meetings, which high-context communicators may perceive as unnecessarily detailed or repetitive as they exchange information in the background on the daily (Hall & Hall, 2001). Although Hall does not show directly in his which nation belongs to which context, there is a strong conceptual overlap between high-context communication and collectivist cultural orientations. Cultures that emphasize group harmony and social relationships tend to rely more on implicit and indirect communication (Hall & Hall, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Language barriers make this even more complex. Cultural factors further influence how messages are interpreted and how communication flows within organisations (Trajkovski & Loosemore, 2006). In a multicultural or multi-language environment, managers often rely on ‘cultural gatekeepers’ – individual workers who act as untrained translators for their group (Loosemore & Lee, 2002). While this seems helpful, it often means that ‘direct communication with the majority of site personnel is not possible’. Information is received ‘thirdhand’, which frequently leads to ‘misinterpretation of instructions’ (Loosemore & Lee, 2002). Furthermore, picking a gatekeeper just because they speak a certain language can ‘inadvertently create conflicts’ if that person is not the group’s natural leader, showing that professional and cultural hierarchies are deeply connected.

Besides the ‘gatekeepers’, Loosemore and Lee (2002) also add, that non-native speakers are often more reluctant to communicate directly with managers and as a result ‘early warnings of foreseeable problems’ may not be shared. Workers may instead try to solve issues on their own or ignore them which increases the need for closer supervision and repeated instructions.

4.2 Occupational lens: Professional identity

Based on the preceding discussion, another layer shaping perceptions must be noticed – nature of the profession. A large part of how situations are interpreted comes from one’s position in the organisation and the type of work one performs. On the construction sites numbers of these worlds collide on a daily basis. Each group brings its own values and that is what Van Maanen and Barley (1982) call a ‘communal way of life’. As they say, the meaning of work is ‘socially constructed and validated in practice by members of an occupation’. Two people can look at the same situation on site and see something very different (Loosemore & Lee, 2002). Not because one is right and the other is wrong, but because they are interpreting it through different lenses.

4.2.1 Subcultures in an organisation

The construction sector is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation and a strong hierarchical structure (Barthorpe et al., 2000). As these authors state, individual actors operate under unstable conditions and the consequence of this is the prevalence of the temporary and project-based employment. They mention a report which notes that ‘casual employment promotes a casual response from employees. Workers do not identify themselves with the successful completion of projects’ and are less likely to follow norms related to punctuality,

attendance or safety. Perception-wise learning procedures, engaging deeply with systems or investing in organisational practices may not be seen as worthwhile.

Building on the fragmentation and construction not being a homogeneous entity, but a collection of groups operating under different conditions with often conflicting goals and aspirations – subcultures are a natural result of this phenomenon. As Loosemore and Lee (2002) point out, what is ‘reasonable, logical and self-evident to one person may be unreasonable to another’. Different trades are often working with different definitions of what makes sense. As Van Maanen and Barley (1982) say, these subcultures are called ‘occupational communities’ and share ‘bonds of solidarity’ when following an unspoken professional code of conduct.

4.2.2 Office vs the field

One way to understand how these subcultures clash is looking at the distance between white-collars (managers and engineers) and blue-collars (manual workers). It is explained by what researchers call the ‘displacement of goals’ (Van Maanen & Barley, 1982). In other words, workers may feel that what they are asked to do does not help them do their actual job.

Workers at the bottom of the organisation often believe that the managers at the top ‘prohibit or at least divert them from accomplishing their “real work”’ (Van Maanen & Barley, 1982). For someone who entered the occupation to build things with their hands and deal with unpredictability, people processing, reporting and documenting competencies can feel like a waste of time. What matters is getting the job done under real conditions. Over time, this creates a different understanding of what is important (Schein, 1996).

Schein (1996) adds that these groups not only have different goals, but also ‘the very meaning of the words they use will differ’. A manager’s idea of a ‘successful project’ is often based on financial health and being on time while a worker’s success it when they see a finished product. He argues that until these different cultures recognize each other’s viewpoints as ‘valid and normal’, organisational learning will persistently struggle.

Interestingly, Hofstede et al. (2010) point out that also the power distance described in the previous chapter varies by occupation. Lower-status, manual workers tend to have more ‘authoritarian values’ than managers. This can build a strong barrier between occupations, potentially sustain a high power distance even within equality-focused work environments like Sweden (Van Maanen & Barley, 1982; Hofstede et al., 2010).

4.2.3 ‘Macho’ culture, position in the hierarchy and risk-taking

The perception of the people engaged in the construction industry is also being shaped by the so-called ‘macho’ culture. Barthorpe et al. (2000) describe how exaggerated masculine behaviour can function as a way of proving belonging to the group. Research shows that workers sometimes perform risky jobs just to ‘exhibit their self-esteem’ or to prove themselves worthy in the eyes of their boss. This is particularly visible among workers in more vulnerable positions. For example, subcontractor workers may take ‘extra risks... to improve their image’. To add, in some cases, workers avoid using protective equipment because they do not want to be ‘teased by their co-workers’ (Choudhry & Fang, 2008). Being tough, not complaining, and handling risk are not just personal traits – these are socially expected behaviours.

At the same time, behaviour changes when group norms change. When co-workers support safety, the use of protective equipment increases (Choudhry & Fang, 2008). Consequently, perception is strongly influenced by the social environment.

Perception is also shaped by incentives. What people pay attention to often depends on what is rewarded. Choudhry and Fang (2008) show that workers are strongly influenced by incentives. During their research one worker explained: ‘If you pay us more for productivity... why would we pay attention to safety?’ Construction workers are constantly making trade-offs. They compare potential benefits with perceived risks.

4.3 Organisational lens: Workplace culture

While national culture provides a broad framework for behaviour, organisational culture serves as the specific ‘collective mental programming’ that distinguishes members of one organisation from another (Hofstede et al., 2010). It is a system of shared meanings, norms, and values that provide group members with clarity, direction and a sense of purpose, without constant negotiation of intent (Smircich, 1983).

4.3.1 Schein’s model of organisational culture

Edgar Schein (2010) created a widely used framework for analysing organisational structure, which identifies three distinct levels at which organisational culture manifests itself.

Artifacts are the most visible and feelable phenomena one encounters in an organisation, such as the physical environment, language, technology, procedures and observable rituals. While artifacts are easy to observe, they are notoriously difficult to interpret. Without insider

knowledge, an observer might misunderstand these structures as ‘inefficient’ or formal ones as ‘bureaucratic’ based on their own cultural biases.

Beneath the artifacts are the espoused beliefs and values which include the organisation's stated strategies, goals and rules. These values often reflect ‘what should be’ rather than actual behaviour. Schein’s observations are that espoused values may represent aspirations or ideals rather than actual drivers of behaviour. For instance, a company might promote ‘teamwork’ while actually rewarding individual competitiveness in practice.

At the deepest level lay basic underlying assumptions, which are the unconscious, ‘taken-for-granted beliefs’ that actually guide how members perceive, think and feel. These assumptions become ingrained through repeated success and shared experiences. Because these assumptions define a group's ‘mental map’, they are extremely difficult to change and often trigger anxiety when challenged. These assumptions are rarely explicitly stated but are consistently reflected in behaviour.

4.3.2 The paradox of formal structure: Decoupling

The gap between espoused values and actual practices is often explained through the concept of decoupling (Jabbouri et al., 2019). According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), organisations frequently adopt formal structures and policies to meet external expectations – such as regulatory requirements – while keeping their everyday work routines unchanged. Organisations that try to conform to institutionalized rules face two key problems: efficiency demands often conflict with ceremonial expectations, and the rules themselves may be inconsistent because they originate from different parts of the environment, making effective coordination and control difficult. As a result, formal procedures exist as ‘myths and ceremonies’, while what is actually being done follows different logics shaped by efficiency, experience or situational demands.

4.3.3 Role of trust in an organisation

Trust is a central component of organisational culture because it enables cooperation beyond formal rules and monitoring. In organisational settings, trust influences whether individuals share information, coordinate their actions and act in the interest of collective goals (Kramer, 1999). When trust is present, employees are more likely to engage in what Fukuyama (1996) calls ‘*spontaneous sociability*’ – voluntary, cooperative behaviour that supports organisational

functioning. This includes sharing knowledge, helping others and exercising responsibility without direct supervision.

Conversely, low trust can lead to withholding information, reduced cooperation and increased conflict (Kramer, 1999). Distrust often arises from ‘category-based’ suspicion, where members of different groups (e.g., managers vs workers or different ethnic groups) evaluate each other as less reliable. Then, regular communication plays an essential role in process of trust-building. As Lewicki and Bunker (1995) argue, trust develops through repeated interactions that allow individuals to understand each other’s expectations and predict behaviour. Kramer (1999) adds that trust is built when authorities demonstrate fairness, neutrality and a genuine interest in the welfare of their subordinates.

4.4 Summary of theoretical framework

This literature review demonstrates that perception on construction sites cannot be explained by a single cultural dimension (Schein, 2010; Alvesson, 2002; Erez & Gati, 2004). As suggested by Erez and Gati (2004), individuals operate simultaneously within multiple cultural layers, and organisational culture alone cannot dominate embedded patterns shaped by national and occupational backgrounds. These levels are complementary rather than fully unified, as culture itself may be understood as a complex and fragmented phenomenon in which different values, meanings and practices may overlap or even contradict one another (Alvesson, 2002). Organisational practices are therefore interpreted through both national and occupational lenses, which explains why the same instruction or policy may be understood differently by different groups. In this context, leadership involves shaping shared meanings rather than only enforcing rules (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), while trust and communication enable coordination beyond formal control mechanisms (Kramer, 1999; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995).

5. Results

This chapter presents the results of empirical research based on interviews. The findings have been organised by theme and present common experiences and perceptions of daily work on multicultural construction sites.

5.1 Perceptions of hierarchy and workplace relationships

The interviews showed that respondents had varying perceptions of hierarchies, workplace relationships and the organisation of daily work on multicultural construction sites in Sweden. These differences primarily concerned expectations of supervisors, the degree of employee autonomy, decision-making processes, the pace of work, and understandings of professionalism and competence.

5.1.1 Flat hierarchy and top-down systems

During the interviews, respondents described the differences between the relatively flat organisational culture in Sweden and the more hierarchical work models to which migrant workers were accustomed (P5; P11; P17; P19). In their statements, respondents primarily focused on how these differences influenced communication, initiative-taking and attitudes toward authority on construction sites. Both Swedish managers and migrant respondents observed that some blue-collar workers expected clearer instructions, stronger supervision and a more decisive management style (P11; P17). One Swedish project manager described his surprise that workers expected clear instructions from management before taking further actions on the construction site:

‘We have an issue here. [...] We are waiting for your decision’ (P17).

Respondents also mentioned that these differences affected everyday communication. Some migrant workers avoided asking questions openly or questioning orders, even if they did not fully understand the instructions (P2; P5; P17; P19). The interview participants repeatedly highlighted that silence, limited responses or lack of questions could be interpreted differently across cultural groups. A migrant site engineer working in Sweden explained:

‘In Sweden, when somebody asks you something and you don't say anything, this is often interpreted as: “yes, I understood”. At the same time, speaking up is seen as a sign that you are listened to and cared for. It's like a sign of respect’ (P19).

Different expectations regarding authority also led to misunderstandings in everyday work situations. One of the H&S managers described a conflict with a Serbian employee, whom he had asked to move away from a dangerous area near street traffic. The employee ignored the instruction because the respondent was not his direct supervisor. The situation escalated after the respondent informed the employee's foreman:

‘He didn't work for me. [...] So I had to go to his manager and tell him. And then he thought that I was telling on him. He was very angry at me’ (P5).

The migrant respondents themselves also described hierarchical practices. One of the Polish blue-collar workers mentioned a situation in which some foremen deliberately restricted access to technical drawings and design information in order to maintain their position and control over the team:

‘[...] there are a lot of foremen who, for example, keep the plans and drawings just for themselves and do not allow others to look at them because they are afraid that someone might be more capable than them, and if that person starts reading the plans, maybe the manager will notice, maybe he will also promote that person to a leader role’ (P1).

5.1.2 Nordic management model and tensions

Respondents also described broader tensions related to the Nordic management model. This model was presented as one based on consultation, consensus, shared responsibility and limited direct control. One Swedish project manager described daily work planning as a process that involves employees in decision-making:

‘We ask for their opinions because we believe that several brains are better than one’ (P4).

For some interview participants, this approach was viewed positively and was associated with greater respect for employees and increased opportunities to influence how work is organised (P4; P8; P14). At the same time, the majority of migrant workers perceived this model as excessively slow, unclear or too procedural (P6; P7; P13; P15; P19). They frequently pointed out that the emphasis on consultation and collective decision-making often led to a diffusion of responsibility and significantly prolonged decision-making processes. As one of participants stated:

‘In Poland [...] the site manager made the decision. It was a short process. [...] But here, you must send it to the main contractor and then it is sent to the designer’ (P13).

In practice, most migrant participants associated this with an excessive number of meetings. There were also opinions that several people were often responsible for the same issue, which sometimes made accountability unclear and delayed action further (P6; P7).

Turkish site engineer with experience of working in more hierarchical systems also pointed out that the Nordic management model can be difficult to reconcile with the specific nature of the construction industry. According to him, construction requires quick decisions, a clear division of responsibilities and more direct management of work processes (P19). In contrast, migrants, particularly those who had been working in the Swedish system for a longer time, viewed the slower pace of work and greater employee autonomy positively. They emphasized that they would no longer feel comfortable within a more hierarchical model – what they referred to as ‘a Polish way of working’ (P8; P14).

5.1.3 Adaptation and integration into the Swedish work model

Respondents representing both migrant workers and Swedish management emphasized that working in the Swedish labour market requires a gradual adaptation to local organisational norms, communication styles and workplace relationships (P8; P10; P14; P15; P17; P19; P20; P21). This topic came up particularly often in the statements of migrants who had worked in Sweden for a long time and reflected on the differences between their initial experiences and their later integration into the organisation (P1; P8; P14; P15).

One of the most raised topics was the role of language proficiency itself. Respondents repeatedly stated that a lack of proficiency in Swedish or English limits their ability to fully participate in professional interactions and workplace relationships. One migrant worker said:

‘If I knew the language, it would be much easier’ (P15).

Additionally, some participants commented that functioning exclusively in English can make it difficult to build closer relationships with Swedish coworkers and to participate more fully in the organisation’s daily life (P8; P14; P17).

Respondents highlighted that adaptation was not limited to language proficiency alone. Another important aspect was adjusting to different expectations regarding initiative-taking, employee

autonomy and relationships with supervisors (P8; P14; P19; P20). Some participants explained that people coming to Sweden often initially operate according to habits and work patterns they brought with them from hierarchical work cultures. As one Polish blue-collar worker noted:

‘I was simply raised and taught that way. That’s how the hierarchy has always been in Poland’ (P15).

Respondents also suggested that adaptation to the Swedish work model involved learning different understandings of workplace responsibility and organisational expectations. One H&S manager described a situation in which a client asked to thank polish blue-collar workers for maintaining high health and safety standards on site. According to Polish participant who attended the meeting with H&S manager, some workers interpreted this appreciation in practical and financial terms:

‘If they appreciate it so much, then they should pay us extra for it’ (P5).

H&S manager described this situation as an example of how some migrant workers initially approached health and safety requirements differently from Swedish management expectations.

Many statements also touched on the importance of long-term collaboration as a prerequisite for building trust and integration. Respondents observed that relations between project participants improved over time as employees continued working together and got to know each other better (P4; P5; P10; P11; P14; P21). One of the Swedish supervisors stated:

‘Since we worked together for almost two years, the distance between the groups faded over time as we built trust’ (P10).

Similarly, other respondents emphasized that employees who regularly return to Sweden gradually gain a better understanding of the local work model and begin to function more comfortably within it (P8; P20). At the same time, one of the Swedish respondents pointed out that building trust required active monitoring and gradually checking whether subcontractors were adapting to local organisational norms (P9). He described situations in which management deliberately observed whether subcontractors would report incidents themselves in accordance with the existing procedures:

‘Often it is our own employees that see the incident in the foreign company and then we report that, and then the question is “will they come in with a report?” We let them have a day or two, just to test them, to see if they say it’ (P9).

However, some respondents also drew attention to the fact that integration does not always occur in practice (P1; P19; P20; P21). This was particularly evident in situations where employees worked mainly in teams managed by supervisors from their own country or in closed ethnic groups. As one interviewee explained:

‘Workers often report to supervisors or foremen from their own countries. This means that they do not always experience Swedish workplace culture’ (P20).

Another respondent described this phenomenon as the creation of a ‘little Poland’ on a Swedish construction site:

‘So, if we bring in workers from Poland, we’re essentially bringing this sort of little Poland into the Swedish context’ (P1).

This phenomenon represents a form of mutual organisational and communicational isolation. Some Swedish managers limited direct contact with migrant workers by transferring communication to team leaders or supervisors, while the migrant workers themselves often preferred to operate within their own national groups (P11; P17). One of the H&S managers noted that both sides were often not particularly interested in deeper integration:

‘I don’t think either side is really interested in integrating. Neither group seems open to the other, and they often prefer to spend breaks separately’ (P16).

Other respondents also emphasized that the short-term nature of labour migration limited some workers’ motivation to integrate and learn the local work model (P1; P6; P8; P9). A Polish supervisor mentioned that some employees regularly change companies or countries of work, which definitely made it difficult to build lasting organisational relationships and a sense of belonging to the project:

‘Yes, of course. It very often happens that employees either call or ask. There are also those who call and say, “Listen, I was somewhere, it was a mistake, and so on. I want to come back”, then he’s working for half a year, and in the meantime looking for a better offer again and leaves’ (P6).

As the respondent emphasized, this kind of rotation had become somewhat normalized in the project work environment:

‘[...] recently we lost an employee to Switzerland, who said that he is already coming back and will stay in Sweden permanently. And this is normal’ (P6).

5.1.4 Competence, stereotypes and workplace recognition

Respondents expressed a wide range of opinions regarding the skills and work ethic of migrant workers. Some participants described them as qualified specialists and valuable employees (P4; P5; P10; P12), while others pointed to situations in which foreign subcontracting companies had overstated the workers’ competencies (P9; P16; P17). Many statements emphasized the importance of practical skills and professional experience. One respondent described a situation in which, despite a language barrier, a migrant worker effectively performed specialized tasks:

‘I have spoken to him almost every day. I don’t understand anything he says. He doesn’t understand what I say. And still, he gets the job done. Twice as fast as anyone else’ (P4).

Respondents also repeatedly pointed out that the level of competence does not depend solely on nationality itself, but rather on the specific company, team and employees’ professional experience (P4; P16; P17; P21). At the same time, stereotypes regarding migrant workers emerged as a significant topic. One respondent described a situation in which Poles were initially viewed with suspicion and only gradually earned the team’s trust. As he explained, they were often perceived through stereotypes portraying Poles as heavy drinkers, thieves or unreliable workers. He said:

‘They looked at us not as employees, but as Poles’ (P15).

5.2 Communication and understanding on multicultural construction sites

Another key topic discussed in the interviews was communication on multicultural construction sites. Respondents emphasized that communication problems can arise both from language barriers but also from differences in communication styles, varying expectations regarding professional relationships and the ways in which the same situations were interpreted.

5.2.1 Language barriers and exclusion

Respondents frequently identified the language barrier as one of the main challenges of everyday work on multicultural construction sites. Even though formal procedures for using English as a common working language were in place, communication in practice often remained fragmented and relied on simplifications, individual interpretations or guesswork (P1; P5; P8; P14; P15; P17; P20).

The majority of respondents underlined that in foreign subcontracting teams, only the supervisor, foreman, or a few individuals spoke English. As a result, the rest of the team was completely dependent on them for communication. A Swedish work manager explained that:

‘In most teams there is a foreman and maybe one or two others who understand English. But not everyone’ (P17).

Similarly, a Turkish site engineer described a project where, out of ninety-six blue-collars, only one person knew English and the role of ‘bridge between languages’ was mainly filled by engineers and supervisors (P19). From the perspective of Polish employees, the situation looked similar. Polish carpenter claimed that the company employs many people, but those who know English ‘can be counted on one hand’ (P2).

In practice, communication often took place indirectly, through supervisors or foremen who acted as informal translators for the entire team (P11; P12; P16; P20). They became the key link between Swedish management and the group of migrant workers. Although this arrangement was perceived as facilitating everyday work organisation, respondents also noted that it has often resulted in filtering, shortening, or distortion of information. One Swedish project manager observed that information communicated to the foreman did not always reach the employees:

‘We had issues with the company last year where we noticed that what we told the foreman didn't reach the guys’ (P11).

Particularly interesting were the statements regarding power and authority relations related to communication. Some foremen clearly preferred that all communication go through them, even if Swedish management could speak to employees directly. A Slovak foreman stated that he would prefer management to contact him first because it was about ‘responsibility and knowing what's going on’ (P12). One Swedish supervisor noted, however, that some migrant foremen

‘want to be the boss’ and therefore preferred that all communication with blue-collar workers went through them (P11). As a result, migrant workers very rarely communicated directly with Swedish management (P16).

Another problem highlighted by interviewees was communication between supervisors who were not constantly present on site:

‘Sometimes there was only one supervisor who wasn't on site all the time and we had to communicate through him. That made communication challenging’ (P17).

A Swedish project manager from a small subcontracting company provided a particularly detailed description of communication problems. Initially, training session was conducted in English, as the employees declared their proficiency in the language. However, it quickly became apparent that most of the team did not understand the information being conveyed. As a result, one of the Polish employees was used as an interpreter. However, the respondent emphasized that over time he lost control over the information being communicated. The translation became much longer than the original instructions, making it difficult to verify what was actually being explained to the workers:

‘The first time he translated word for word. [...] But by the third or fourth course, I would say one sentence, and he would speak for five minutes’ (P21).

Communication shifted into internal discussions within the employee group, at the same time limiting management’s control over the content being conveyed.

The interviews also repeatedly highlighted situations in which workers formally confirmed that they understood instructions, despite not actually understanding them (P5; P17). A Swedish H&S manager described it as follows:

‘They say “yeah” and then they have no idea’ (P5).

Another Swedish H&S manager noted that basic communication was extremely limited:

‘When I talk with them, they can hardly say “yes” or “no”’ (P16).

Two respondents noted that communication problems did not result solely from limited language proficiency, but also from a reluctance to ask questions or raise concerns with supervisors (P5; P8). Migrant workers were often described as individuals who avoided

complaints, additional requests, or openly expressing dissent in order not to be perceived as problematic (P5; P9; P10; P13; P19). As one H&S manager stated:

‘They don't want to be a problem’ (P5).

Similar observations were also made by a Polish respondent working directly for a Swedish general contractor (P8). He emphasized that workers often did not report the need for better equipment or improved working conditions because, in their view, it would lead to additional costs for the company. He pointed out that Swedish employees openly refused to work with faulty or low-quality machines, whereas Polish employees were more likely to remain silent because they were ‘taught to think about costs’ and did not want to cause problems for their employer.

The interviews also showed the issue of exclusion from informal communication and everyday workplace interactions. Respondents emphasized that a lack of Swedish language skills limited their ability to participate in conversations, meetings and relationship-building within the team (P8; P14; P15; P19; P20). Some respondents also emphasized that functioning solely in English can hinder long-term integration into the Swedish work environment (P8; P15; P17). One Polish supervisor working for a Swedish general contractor described his experience as follows:

‘I'm not on the sidelines, but it's different when the entire office speaks Swedish’ (P14).

5.2.2 Different communication styles and expectations

Respondents emphasized, however, that language alone was not the source of communication problems. Cultural differences and distinct communication styles also played a significant role (P1; P6; P16; P19). The interviews contained numerous examples in which the same behaviour was interpreted differently by distinct groups of employees. One Polish blue-collar worker noted that Swedish employees often perceive the loud communication of Poles or Slovaks as conflict, even though it is a normal way of talking to them (P1). At the same time, the more calm and indirect communication typical of the Swedish work environment was sometimes interpreted by migrant workers as lacking clarity, specificity or decisiveness (P6; P15).

Participants also described different expectations regarding communication, initiative-taking and interaction with supervisors. Some respondents indicated that migrant workers often preferred a more hierarchical model of communication, based on contact through a supervisor

or foreman (P4; P9; P12; P16; P17). As a result, employees did not always feel comfortable asking questions directly or admitting a lack of understanding. One Polish foreman stated:

‘There are a lot of people who are afraid to admit they don't know something’ (P2).

Similarly, one Swedish supervisor noted that migrant workers preferred to remain passive during communication:

‘They didn't want to interrupt or ask too many questions. They preferred to stay quiet rather than appear difficult or disruptive’ (P10).

Migrant workers themselves also described that, despite understanding some conversations, they did not feel confident to actively speak up and add their insights (P15). Furthermore, respondents described situations in which they consciously pretended to understand instructions. As another Polish foreman described the situation during a training session organised in the company, where he was supposed to act as an interpreter for employees:

‘The guys said: “Okay, leave her alone, we’ll pretend we understand”’ (P2).

Interviews also revealed differences in the ways communication, feedback, and reporting practices were interpreted by diverse groups of employees. Some migrant workers perceived the Swedish communication culture as difficult to interpret, as friendly and informal relationships could coexist with formal reporting of violations (P2; P6). One Polish foreman described it as follows:

‘A Swede comes, smiles, pats you on the back, says “good job”. And five minutes later goes to the office and writes a report on you that you didn’t have glasses. For us, that’s snitching, for them, that’s the system’ (P2).

A Polish supervisor also indicated that the migrant status itself influenced the way of communication and willingness for open confrontation (P6). He observed that migrant workers were less likely to confront Swedish supervisors openly due to their less stable organisational position and concerns about potential consequences.

5.3 Formal procedures and everyday work

Occupational safety was one of the most extensive topics discussed in the interviews. Respondents described it both as a highly formalized element of work organisation in the

Swedish construction sector and as an area in which the gap between procedures and everyday practice was clearly visible.

5.3.1 Organisational control between compliance and practice

Respondents did not question the value of the Swedish system, which was often perceived as significantly more developed and effective than the systems known from other countries (P6; P7; P8; P14; P15; P20). However, the interviews also showed tensions between formal safety regulations and their practical implementation on the construction sites. The problem was therefore not the lack of procedures, but the ways they were implemented, interpreted and enforced in daily work.

A Polish supervisor pointed out that formal reporting was not always perceived as a tool for real safety improvement (P6). He described how reporting a problem triggered further layers of bureaucracy without necessarily resolving the issue on the construction site:

‘The point is that it triggers the entire Swedish procedure: identifying what went wrong, who was responsible and how the problem should be addressed [...]. Then they create another procedure and then another one [...]. But in practice, it does not really solve the problem. We have to cover the reinforcement, and it is still slippery afterwards. No one can stop the snow or difficult weather conditions on the construction site’ (P6).

From this perspective, he perceived procedures as a mechanism for producing documentation rather than as a tool for practical problem-solving. He also described reporting systems as something that was often done primarily to fulfil formal organisational expectations:

‘The truth is that it is often done just to find something to report and check off’ (P6).

A similar tension also emerged in Polish foreman experiences with injury reporting. He described a situation in which, after cutting his finger, he reported the incident because he required medical attention (P15). Instead of perceiving the process as supportive, he felt that the conversation focused primarily on assigning blame and responsibility:

‘I reported it because, of course, I went to the emergency room. And our health and safety officer [...] was asking a lot of questions. Whose fault is it? Whose fault? And so on’ (P15).

He pointed out that such an approach could discourage employees from reporting similar incidents in the future:

‘In the end, I stopped. [...] So I say, it was reported, but I think it was meant to avoid compensation and simply not report the incident. That's how I felt’ (P15).

Interviews also revealed situations in which formal safety rules and procedures were not fully aligned with actual construction practices. A Polish supervisor described a situation in which the main contractor documented minimal deviations on the subcontractor's part very carefully, while simultaneously overlooking his own organisational shortcomings (P6). He explained that when a subcontractor was considered late in reheating the concrete, the temperature was meticulously measured and documented:

‘He would go around meticulously, check the temperature and then write it down. It was brought up at the meeting that it was four point nine degrees, when it should have been five’ (P6).

However, when the problem resulted from the general contractor's failure to provide a functioning heater, the issue was downplayed, and the temperature was no longer measured:

‘It was downplayed, and what's more, then the temperature suddenly wasn't measured, where it was obvious it hadn't reached the appropriate temperature [...]. They knew this perfectly well, so they didn't measure it, and the issue was pushed aside’ (P6).

A similar mechanism emerged in situations where formal procedures proved difficult to implement in practice. The same Polish supervisor described a case of faulty welding equipment that prevented work from being completed according to prescribed procedures (P6). The subcontractor reported the problem, but work had to continue before the equipment could be replaced. As a result, the employees applied their own solution based on practical experience:

‘Our solution, our know-how, we knew how much additional welding was actually needed [...], we did it in several stages, and it was done well, but it still stretched the procedure’ (P6).

The respondent emphasized that this solution was informally accepted because it allowed work to continue:

‘We solved the problem as a subcontractor. And of course, the Swedes turned a blind eye because they knew they didn't have the right welding machine’ (P6).

The Polish supervisor also described a situation involving a machine that did not meet Euro 5 emissions requirements and was formally prohibited from operating on the construction site (P6). The solution was to position it outside the construction gate, connect it through a hole in the fence, and continue using it for project work:

‘Formally, the requirement was met, but in practice, the machine continued to operate’ (P6).

5.3.2 Organisational protection and unequal workplace realities

Although the Swedish construction sector was often described as highly regulated and safety-oriented, interviews revealed that workers did not experience the organisational system in the same way. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that access to protection, support, and the ability to make use of organisational procedures depended on the form of employment, subcontracting relationships, position in the project structure, and level of trust present on the construction site (P4; P5; P11; P13, P16; P19; P20). As one respondent summarized: ‘everybody's equal on paper, but some are more equal in reality’ (P19).

Many respondents indicated that migrant workers operated in a more precarious organisational position. Temporary employment, subcontracting arrangements and dependence on the employer increased fears of job loss or replacement by other workers (P5; P10; P13; P16; P19; P20). One supervisor stated that subcontractors ‘had to prove themselves otherwise we could remove them’ (P10), while an H&S manager emphasized:

‘I think migrant workers are afraid to lose their jobs’ (P5).

This fear influenced both their willingness to report problems and their use of formal protection mechanisms. Respondents described situations in which employees hid injuries or avoided reporting accidents for fear of professional consequences. One Polish employee described the case of a Lithuanian worker who, after being hit by a ceiling slab, hid in a container instead of seeking medical attention because ‘he was afraid they would kick him out’ (P13). He also recalled a Slovak worker who did not report an injury after a fall, went home and was found dead the following day.

Economic vulnerability also appeared in respondents’ statements regarding subcontracted blue-collar workers. One Polish employee described Portuguese workers who were employed as cheap labour and received extremely low wages:

‘Like the Portuguese workers who worked for five hundred euros. [Name] showed me on his hand that he earned five hundred euros. He was very scared and literally shaking’ (P13).

Differences in access to organisational support also depended on the form of employment. One of the H&S managers explained that workers directly employed by Swedish companies were usually offered support and rehabilitation in situations involving abuse rather than being immediately dismissed:

‘If one of our employees tests positive for drugs, we create a rehabilitation plan. They are not automatically dismissed. We try to help them. However, I have seen cases where subcontracted foreign workers were simply sent home after failing a drug test. [...] They kick them out because there is probably someone else who’s standing in line that will work without problems’ (P16).

Unequal treatment was also visible in the enforcement of safety regulations. According to one Polish foreman, migrant workers were photographed and reprimanded for minor health and safety violations, while similar behaviour by Swedish workers was sometimes ignored. He referred, among other things, to a situation in which a Swedish excavator operator performed work at height without proper safety measures. According to the respondent, the H&S manager intervened verbally but did not take a photograph to document the violation, whereas similar situation involving Polish workers were routinely photographed and reported. Eventually, the matter was ultimately downplayed (P6). The respondent also claimed that one Swedish subcontractor was instructed to ‘let go’ of enforcing some of the regulations because the company was strategically important to the project (P6). Such experiences weakened employees' trust in the impartiality of the organisational system.

Respondents also emphasized that previous professional experience influenced the perceptions of the safety system and their willingness to report problems. One Swedish project manager described Slovak employees who initially avoided reporting problems because, in previous projects, any damage had resulted in costs for their company (P4). Only after working for a longer period in a more stable organisational environment, they began to openly communicate problems. Daily contact with local management and real access to support structures also played a similar role. A representative of trade unions described a situation from a large infrastructure project in northern Sweden, where French supervisors employed an authoritarian management style, ‘shouting at workers and even physically pushing them’ (P20). Employees from Poland,

Estonia, Lithuania and Ukraine were shocked by this behaviour, as they had not previously encountered a similar work culture in Sweden. Eventually, they began using whistleblower channels and contacting the trade union directly, which led to the investor's intervention (P20).

One representative of trade unions also described difficulties in establishing contact with migrant workers. He recalled a situation in which union representatives visited an Orthodox church attended by Polish workers in order to start conversations and encourage workers to share information about workplace conditions:

‘Polish workers used to go to church on Sundays, and union representatives went there to talk to them. That helped build trust, and some workers started sharing information and cooperating. Sometimes you need unusual ways to reach people’ (P9).

Interviews also indicated that many newcomers initially lacked a practical understanding of local safety standards. Communication barriers and a fear of asking questions sometimes led workers to improvisation rather than reporting problems:

‘When you can't understand and you're afraid to ask, then you try to think for yourself’ (P5).

At the same time, respondents emphasized that understanding local rules developed gradually through daily work practices, and that effective safety culture required not only formal procedures but also daily support, communication, and a sense that reporting problems would not lead to negative consequences for the employees (P5; P11; P16).

5.3.3 Productivity pressure and risk-taking

Many both foreign and Swedish respondents described migrant workers as hardworking, efficient and willing to work intensively (P1; P2; P4; P10; P13; P19). It was often pointed out that high productivity is one of the main competitive advantages of foreign subcontractors (P6; P11; P13). At the same time, respondents emphasized that this productivity is driven by strong organisational and internal pressures (P1; P2; P6; P13; P19). Migrant workers were described as people trying to prove their worth, fearing job loss or a weaker position within the team. Some respondents also pointed out intense competition among migrant workers and job insecurity resulting from the nature of subcontracting (P6; P19; P21). Additionally, a trade union representative noted that companies employing posted workers can save approximately 20% on labour costs (P20), which further reinforces expectations regarding high productivity and availability among migrant workers.

The theme of self-imposed high work pace appeared in many statements. Respondents described situations in which workers performed tasks faster or more intensely than was necessary (P1; P2; P13; P14). One respondent stated that ‘a Pole has to show that he can do more’ (P2).

Similar observations were also made by respondents who had been working in Sweden for many years. Some respondents pointed out that migrant workers often place pressure on themselves and may struggle to adapt to the slower pace of work characteristic of the Swedish organisational model (P1; P2; P8; P14). One Polish blue-collar worker described his early experiences working in Sweden as follows:

‘I was already running around, but here you don’t run, right? They had to hold me back’ (P2).

Some respondents linked this approach to their earlier professional experiences and the work culture typical of Central and Eastern European countries (P2; P7; P13; P15). The interviews suggested that many migrant workers perceived hard work, overtime and maintaining a high work pace as necessary to remain competitive in the Swedish labour market (P6; P11; P13). Respondents also highlighted that time pressure was often unevenly distributed. In particular, subcontractors paid for completing a specific scope of work felt greater pressure regarding deadlines than employees hired directly by the main contractor (P6; P7; P11; P19). At the same time, some participants emphasized that greater effort does not always mean greater efficiency (P8; P14). According to respondents, the Swedish work model was more strongly associated with careful planning, ergonomics and proper work preparation than with the speed of task competition alone (P8; P14; P17).

Polish supervisors described how deadline and performance pressure was directed primarily at foreign subcontractor:

‘all the pressure was on the Poles to catch up’ (P6; P7).

In practice, this meant that many employees did not feel they could refuse additional work or question the general contractor's expectations. As respondents stated:

‘A Swede has the right to refuse, but a Polish subcontractor doesn't’ (P6; P7).

This was particularly evident in the statement of a Turkish supervisor, who described how Swedish supervisors were responsible for relatively small teams and limited areas of

responsibilities, while he himself supervised approximately 45–50 employees and multiple project areas simultaneously (P19). Despite earlier promises, the organisation did not provide him with additional support, as he was able to perform his work at the expense of his own health. The respondent also emphasized that other employees could say ‘no, we can’t,’ while he himself ‘was never able to say no’ (P19).

Productivity pressure was also linked to risk-taking and ignoring safety regulations. One Polish supervisor described a situation in which a worker spontaneously climbed onto the formwork without safety equipment during concrete casting to stop the structure from leaking and ‘save’ the concrete work. Although the action was perceived by the team as saving the project, the worker was later punished after the violation had been documented by Swedish supervisors:

‘The guy saved the concreting [...] and got a five hundred zloty fine’ (P6).

Respondents also described situations in which workers felt the need to constantly appear productive, even during periods of organisational downtime. Migrant workers were criticized or photographed while waiting for equipment or a crane, whereas similar situations involving Swedish workers often did not attract the same attention. This reinforced the belief that activity and commitment were constantly required from migrant workers (P1; P6; P7; P14). Interviews also revealed tensions between formal safety declarations and everyday expectations for productivity. Respondents described situations in which ‘saving the situation’ by improvising, speeding up work, or bypassing procedures gradually became the organisational norm (P6). When projects began to fall behind schedule, the pressure was shifted to subcontractors to ‘make up’ for lost time.

Respondents also described situations in which employees initially refused to use personal protective equipment because they wanted to ‘look tough’ (P10) or performed dangerous tasks faster and ‘by taking shortcuts,’ arguing that ‘nothing had happened before’ (P16). At the same time, respondents emphasized that the problem should not be attributed solely to the nationality or culture of migrant workers. As one employee stated:

‘It’s not just that we Poles do it. Swedes do it too’ (P14).

6. Discussion

To understand why a single workplace reality can be interpreted in fundamentally different ways, this chapter examines the intersecting influences of national, occupational and organisational cultures on multicultural construction sites, tracing their profound impact on daily perceptions, behaviours and interactions.

6.1 Perceptions shaped by national culture

Focusing on the broader macro-level of diversity, the following analysis explores how national cultural backgrounds dictate patterns of communication, hierarchy and trust, while fundamentally altering how workplace behaviour is interpreted among site actors.

6.1.1 Communication as a cultural filter

On Swedish multicultural construction sites, English is often the bridge, but the interviews reveal that this bridge is built on shaky ground. Swedish respondents repeatedly noted a pattern where migrant workers would nod, say ‘yes’, and even sign safety protocols, only to proceed with the work in a way that demonstrated they had not fully understood the instruction (P2; P5; P17; P19; P21).

Such mechanism can be understood through differences between low-context and high-context communication cultures (Hall & Hall, 2001). Within the Swedish low-context communication model, verbal confirmation is generally interpreted as explicit understanding. However, workers socialised in more collectivist and high-context environments may treat such responses primarily as relational gestures aimed at maintaining smooth interaction and avoiding disruption. Several respondents observed that migrant workers often avoided asking additional questions because they did not want to appear problematic or incompetent (P5; P10). In their cultural framework, which is frequently characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, admitting a lack of understanding is an admission of incompetence, or worse, a disruption of the flow of work (Hofstede et al., 2010). So, instead of openly asking questions, workers often prioritized maintaining smooth interaction (P5; P8; P10), even when they understood what was being said and could contribute their own perspectives (P15). Instead, they relied on previous technical habits or informal knowledge shared within their own group rather than directly seeking clarification from management, deepening their passivity within the broader site environment (P2; P5; P15; Loosemore et al., 2010; Loosemore & Lee, 2002; Trajkovski & Loosemore, 2006).

6.1.2 Power distance in practice

The interviews highlight a fundamental clash in how authority is perceived. In the Swedish model, authority is often seen as functional and flat; anyone has the right to intervene. But for many migrant workers, loyalty is personal and vertical. In a high power distance culture, the foreman is a role model whose authority carries weight because he controls the worker's daily reality (Hofstede et al., 2010). The story about the Serbian worker who refused to listen to safety concerns from anyone other than his direct boss perfectly illustrates this dynamic (P5), explaining why many migrants preferred communicating exclusively through their foreman rather than directly with Swedish management (P4; P6; P9; P12; P16; P17). Vertical loyalty becomes even stronger when Swedish main contractors practice limited supervision. Instead of interpreting this approach as trust, migrant workers often perceive it as a lack of direct interest or organisational care. Feeling isolated from the broader Swedish system, they rely entirely on their immediate subcontractor group and foreman for guidance and security. Such reliance fosters a strong sense of collectivism/embeddedness, where workers feel responsible for the boss's financial survival (Hofstede et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2004). Consequently, reporting hazards or requesting better equipment – mentioned by a Polish carpenter (P8) – is not seen as a right, but as a potential burden on the company, leading to a culturally driven silence.

Structural silence and dependency are further compounded by occupational hierarchy and active gatekeeping practices within the subcontractor teams. Foremen often reinforce their vertical authority by filtering or simplifying information before passing it to workers (P11) and actively preferred to remain the sole channel of communication with upper management (P11; P12). In some cases, documents or drawings were withheld from new workers to maintain hierarchical control within the group (P1). High power distance thus continued to exist even within the formally equality-oriented Swedish work environment.

The environment of vertical control and calculated silence stands in sharp contrast to the behaviour of native Swedish employees operating in a low power distance culture. Swedish workers feel individually empowered to stand up for their rights, openly refusing to work with improper tools (P8). This intense sense of individual entitlement means they do not hesitate to challenge organisational directives if their personal rights or safety are compromised. One Swedish manager (P5) illustrated this by describing his frustration with Swedish employees who constantly negotiate or openly question safety instructions rather than simply following directives.

6.1.3 Trust, ‘spontaneous sociability’ and invisible barriers

A multicultural site is often not one team, but a collection of separate groups. This fragmentation is best explained through Fukuyama’s (1996) concept of ‘spontaneous sociability’ – cooperation and trust become difficult when workers lack informal social connections. On Swedish sites, the language barriers reinforced these divisions. Some Swedish supervisors preferred to communicate through foremen rather than directly with migrant workers, while many migrants themselves remained primarily within their own national or linguistic groups (P11; P17) which reflects the theory proposed by Loosemore et al. (2010). As one H&S manager noted, ‘I don’t think either side is really interested in integrating.’ (P16).

Mutual isolation often resulted in structural enclaves on-site (P1). Because migrant workers routinely reported exclusively to supervisors or foremen from their own countries, they were effectively insulated from experiencing or adapting to local Swedish workplace culture (P20). In such fragmented environments, trust was not granted automatically; instead, it required active and strategic monitoring by the main contractor. One Swedish manager (P9) described deliberately testing foreign subcontractors to see if they would report according to procedure. Such systemic testing perfectly reflects Kramer’s (1999) category-based suspicion, where the absence of informal social connections forces management to replace spontaneous trust with defensive verification.

Use of Swedish language in the presence of migrants further strengthened this separation. For migrant workers, it functioned not only as a communication barrier, but also as a form of exclusion (P8, P14, P15, P17, P19, P20). Trust was therefore often replaced by stereotypes and assumptions about Swedes or foreign workers (P15), particularly because workers had limited opportunities for informal interaction like chatting over a coffee or during problem-solving session – a category-based suspicion described by Kramer (1999). In practice, such dynamic is reflected in the Polish foreman’s statement that ‘They looked at us not as employees, but as Poles’ (P15). Many migrants described entering the workplace with a perceived trust deficit and feeling the need to constantly prove themselves through visible physical effort and productivity (Fukuyama, 1996; Kramer, 1999).

6.1.4 Two definitions of trust

One of the clearest examples of cultural misunderstanding concerns different interpretations of loyalty and reporting practices. As the Polish foreman explained: a Swedish colleague might compliment a worker and later still submit a formal safety report because safety glasses were

missing (P2). For many Polish workers, shaped by stronger collectivist loyalties and higher power distance expectations, this could be interpreted as hypocrisy or ‘snitching’. Loyalty is expected to involve protecting members of the group and overlooking small mistakes. Even when you see the mistake, you should discuss it personally and never involve the entire system (Hofstede et al., 2010). Such collectivist expectations clarify why the Serbian worker was angry at the Swedish H&S manager after the manager reported to the worker’s boss that the work was being performed unsafely (P5).

Within the Swedish organisational context, however, reporting is more closely connected to low power distance principles and collective responsibility. Filing a report is not necessarily interpreted as a personal attack, but rather as part of maintaining standardized procedures that apply equally to everyone, reflecting the emphasis feminine cultures place on well-being and safety (Hofstede et al., 2010).

6.2 Perceptions shaped by occupational culture

Professional identity and occupational socialization often cut across national boundaries. The following analysis examines how specific job roles and industry norms forge distinct frameworks for on-site behaviour and risk tolerance.

6.2.1 The ‘macho’ shield and reporting culture

Perhaps the most visible conflict on-site is between the Swedish reporting culture and the occupational norms many migrant workers bring with them. The Swedish system, based on the feminine values, is built on the assumption that reporting a near-miss or a small injury contributes to collective safety and organisational learning. However, this often clashed with occupational norms shaped by masculine cultural values emphasizing toughness, endurance and visible productivity (Hofstede et al., 2010), as well as structural conditions linked to subcontracting and job insecurity (Barthorpe et al., 2000). In a masculine occupational culture spending hours on preparation or documentation for a relatively short task without getting paid extra seems irrational, particularly among migrants whose work abroad was strongly financially motivated (Choudhry & Fang, 2008). While management treats safety as a basic, everyday duty, these precarious workers often view it through a purely transactional lens. For them, praise for following rules is not enough – they interpret safety compliance as an extra task that deserves direct financial compensation (P5).

Furthermore, this reluctance is often reinforced by masculine norms where workers initially refuse better protective gear to maintain a ‘tough’ professional image (P10) or taking dangerous shortcuts because nothing went wrong in the past (P16). Such attitudes also contribute to the association between injury reporting, weakness and job insecurity. Stories about the Lithuanian worker fleeing with a back injury because he feared ‘they would kick him out’, and a Slovak worker who refrained from informing about an injury after a fall and was later found dead (P13) are extreme but real examples of this. They illustrate how vulnerable employment positions, combined with macho occupational culture and insecurity, may discourage workers from admitting weakness or seeking help, effectively silencing migrants (P5; P10; P13; P16; P19; P20; Barthorpe et al., 2000). As a result, incidents often remained within subcontractor groups instead of entering the formal reporting system. Some workers sought treatment outside Sweden, allowing official safety records to remain formally intact while injuries were handled informally (P13).

The exact same defensive silence can be seen among Portuguese workers earning extremely low wages, who were reluctant to raise issues because both they and their migrant supervisors feared losing their jobs. In subcontracting structures marked by dependency and insecurity, even minor concerns may remain unspoken and never enter the formal system (Barthorpe et al., 2000). Defensive silence may also reflect habits carried over from past jobs in harsher, less secure labour markets. When workers are used to being fined or fired for making mistakes, they bring that defensive caution with them to new jobs (P4). While Swedish workers tend to see reporting as a professional duty, some migrant workers reflect a belief that the system functions as control rather than protection. Unlearning this deep fear and learning to speak up requires long-term experience in a stable, genuinely secure workplace where they see no negative consequences (Kramer, 1999; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995).

However, the interviews show that native Swedish workers often break the rules in the exact same way (P14), suggesting that ‘macho’ risk-taking behaviour is fundamentally an occupational subculture driven by structural project pressures, rather than an exclusively national characteristic.

6.2.2 Heroism vs procedure

Polish supervisor’s account of a worker climbing formwork without a harness to save a concrete casting (P6) demonstrates a direct clash between masculine occupational culture and formal organisational safety culture. From the worker’s perspective, the act represented commitment,

competence and loyalty to the project. Within masculine occupational norms, taking personal risks for the success of the task can function as proof of worth (Barthorpe et al., 2000) – eventually leaving him with a feeling of being undervalued – while Swedish site management operating in feminine context, sees a serious violation of safety procedures (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Interviewees also described a ‘photo trap’, where migrant workers were photographed while waiting for cranes or materials, while Swedish subcontractors were not subjected to the same scrutiny (P6). Many migrants therefore felt pressure to remain visibly active at all times, sometimes bypassing procedures, performing unnecessary physical work simply to demonstrate productivity or working with whatever was available to save costs and meet tight deadlines, exposing themselves to heightened physical risk in the process (P1; P2; P6; P14; P15), which reflects fragmentation into occupational subcultures and unequal visibility between ‘those who observe’ and ‘those who are observed’ (Van Maanen & Barley, 1982).

6.2.3 When role outweighs nationality

Although many conflicts in the interviews are discussed through nationality, the findings also show that occupational culture can override national culture. Such pattern is visible among engineers and long-term workers who had become socialized into Swedish professional norms.

One Polish supervisor (P14) explained that he could never return to the ‘Polish way’ of working, but also that he never had a problem with switching to the Swedish professional approach. Among engineers, documentation, planning and compliance with safety regulations are viewed as central aspects of professional competence rather than bureaucratic distractions – no matter the country. Van Maanen and Barley’s (1982) concept of ‘occupational communities’, where occupational groups develop common understandings that transcend nationality becomes visible here.

A similar pattern appeared among blue-collar workers. A Polish carpenter (P8), who began his career in Sweden, never developed the high-pressure or ‘macho’ work habits associated with traditional Polish construction culture. Instead, he adopted Swedish approaches to safety and organisation from the beginning. That case reveals that workplace behaviour is shaped not only by nationality, but also by professional socialization (Barthorpe et al., 2000).

6.3 Perceptions shaped by organisational culture

To complete the cultural matrix, this final section investigates the institutional environment of the construction site, analysing how formal structures, daily routines and informal practices condition rule interpretation, communication and safety compliance.

6.3.1 The Bureaucratic Theatre

The interaction between the ‘white-collar’ main contractor and the ‘blue-collar’ subcontractor reveals a profound clash of organisational and communication logics. Within the Swedish model, frequent meetings and extensive documentation function as critical organisational artifacts that reflect espoused values of accountability and shared responsibility (Schein, 2010). Subcontractors, however, often operate under a different framework, viewing these administrative routines as detached from practical realities.

A Polish supervisor’s (P6) remark about the Swedish ‘meeting to schedule a meeting’ captures this tension, where what Swedish managers see as essential coordination grounded in a low-context reliance on explicit clarification and low uncertainty avoidance culture is perceived by migrant supervisors and workers from high-context backgrounds – who rely on implicit, practice-based communication – as slow, unnecessarily bureaucratic distraction (P6; P7; P13; P15; P19; Hall & Hall, 2001). Safety reporting gets downgraded to a box to be ticked to keep the client happy, rather than a tool for actual organisational learning (P6). Because the guys in the field feel that paperwork never leads to actual, practical improvements on site, a disconnection emerges between the ‘office’ and the ‘field’.

6.3.2 Manipulation of rules and systemic decoupling

Formal organisational procedures on multicultural construction sites often function more as symbolic demonstrations of compliance than as consistently applied operational practices. Consequently, a growing gap emerges between espoused organisational values such as equality and safety, and the underlying priority of maintaining productivity and meeting project deadlines (Schein, 2010).

The interviews revealed deep decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Jabbouri et al., 2019) between organisational ideals of equality and actual workload distribution. One Turkish supervisor described supervising tens of workers across multiple areas without additional support, despite earlier promises from management (P19). While equality and shared responsibility were formally promoted, foreign subcontractors experienced a severe asymmetry

in how production demands were applied. Consequently, foreign workers felt structurally unable to refuse extra work or question expectations (P6; P7; P19). Swedish workers perceive this dialogic pushback and the capacity to object as a natural right, migrant workers, operating from a more precarious organisational position, actively avoided confronting Swedish supervisors openly due to concerns about potential negative consequences or immediate job loss (P5; P6; P10; P13; P16; P19; P20). What becomes visible is how job insecurity within subcontracting chains silences workers, undermining the main contractor's official emphasis on equality (Barthorpe et al., 2000).

The story of the Euro 5 non-compliant machine is another masterclass in institutional decoupling (P6; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Jabbouri et al., 2019). On paper, the site environmental rule was perfectly satisfied; in reality, pollution was moved just outside the gate. Subcontractors similarly manipulated the administrative records, but regarding workers' experience or wages in order to bypass administrative barriers and meet project deadlines (P9; P16; P17).

Even the main contractor participates in this theatre of compliance. Respondents described situations where subcontractors were carefully monitored for minor procedural deviations, while comparable shortcomings on the contractor's side were ignored or informally bypassed to avoid delays and maintain productivity (P6; P7). This double standard splits directly along the lines of nationality and business importance: minor slip-ups by foreign workers are strictly reported, while identical mistakes by native workers or critical subcontractors are quietly ignored to protect the project timeline (P6). As a result, migrants become trapped between conflicting demands – following strict safety rules on paper while simultaneously facing pressure to keep production moving. Ultimately, such approach turns institutional decoupling (Jabbouri et al., 2019; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) into an active management choice. Instead of building a fair culture, it creates a system where rules are used only when convenient, which deeply damages workers' trust in the organisation.

In addition, systemic 'decoupling' is further reinforced when the act of reporting is met with a focus on liability rather than support (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Jabbouri et al., 2019). A foreman (P15) described how reporting a finger injury resulted in a defensive interrogation by a safety officer focused on assigning blame, which signalled to workers that the system prioritizes organisational protection over individual safety.

The fragmentation is finally reinforced by unequal disciplinary practices. Migrant workers who violated safety rules or struggled with substance abuse often faced immediate punishment from their foreign employers, while Swedish workers in similar situations were more likely to receive institutional support or rehabilitation.

6.3.3 Project-based fragmentation and cultural layers

The project-based nature of construction characterized by high labour rotation and short-term migration mean that workers have little incentive to integrate into the system (P1; P6; P8; P9; Barthorpe et al., 2000; Van Maanen & Barley, 1982). When relationships are this fragmented, the boundary between national and organisational culture becomes unstable, like when the French supervisors who brought an authoritarian management style onto a Swedish site. However, the reaction of the workers to report it to the union showed how integration into the local system changes behaviour over time (P20). This adaptation is a gradual process that happens through daily practice, not overnight rules. Real safety requires building everyday psychological safety, where open communication and consistent support prove to workers that pointing out problems will not lead to blame or penalties (P5; P10; P11; P16; P18; Kramer, 1999). Since formal on-site channels are often feared as tools of management surveillance, building this trust frequently requires looking entirely outside the workplace. To break through these barriers, institutional actors like unions have had to reach out to workers in their own trusted community spaces – such as local churches. Meeting in a familiar, non-work environment helps build a personal baseline of safety away from the site's pressures, which is often the only way to encourage workers to speak openly (P9).

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrated that misunderstandings, mistrust and fragmentation are often structurally produced through the way work is organised and managed on construction projects. Improving collaboration in multicultural teams requires not only better communication, but also organisational and managerial changes that address the deeper dynamics shaping everyday work on site. To address these challenges, this section offers a series of practical recommendations. Rather than presenting a definitive manual, these suggestions represent an interpretive synthesis of the empirical data, specific pilot initiatives highlighted by the respondents, and the authors' own professional insights within the sector.

One of the clearest findings concerns communication practices between managers and workers. Communication based on closed questions such as ‘Did you understand?’ may create only an illusion of understanding. The project managers could benefit from moving toward verification-based communication. Instead of relying on confirmation alone, managers should encourage workers to explain tasks in their own words, demonstrate the next steps or describe possible risks related to the work. This operational clarity may be further enhanced by utilizing text-light visual management tools, such as 3D computer models and photo sequences. However, implementing these field practices effectively points to the potential value of providing practical cross-cultural leadership training for site managers. This training could prepare them to navigate varying national perceptions of power distance, recognize how flat hierarchies can be misinterpreted as a lack of leadership, and actively build trust through fairness and neutrality rather than relying on rigid, defensive documentation.

Organizational fragmentation frequently occurs when entire national groups are outsourced under independent supervisors, creating isolated operational groups where communication is filtered through intermediaries. This separation is aggravated by contractual payment systems like piece-rates, which pressure teams to prioritize production speed over quality and safety. To bridge this structural gap, contracts may be approached as mechanisms for integration rather than neutral administrative tools. Project managers could therefore move away from organising work strictly by subcontractor divisions and instead encourage greater cooperation between domestic and international teams during complex project stages. Integrating subcontractor foremen directly into on-site governance and engaging them in the culture of the main contractor appears crucial, particularly because the interviews demonstrated that safety culture depends heavily on the priorities communicated by immediate supervisors – if they prioritize

deadlines and production speed, workers may begin to treat safety as secondary (P5). Their regular participation in scheduling meetings, joint safety inspections, and ongoing site coordination may strengthen accountability, improve communication, and help create a more unified project culture.

Reporting culture cannot easily be imposed on people who view the act of reporting as a threat to their livelihood. To break the ‘macho’ shield, it is proposed that safety should be reframed not as ‘following Swedish rules’, but rather as a form of craftsmanship and long-term work sustainability that protects workers’ health. To address the distrust in the reporting system, project managers might benefit from creating more neutral communication channels in cooperation with trade unions or other external actors perceived as independent from management. Pilot projects informing subcontractor employees about their rights, local work practices, and available support structures could also be an advantage (P9). Additional measures – such as anonymous QR-code reporting systems placed in isolated areas or appointing trusted worker representatives as communication ambassadors – could further reduce fear and encourage openness. This ambassador role, specifically trained to liaise with labour unions without protecting the company's financial interests, works side-by-side with the crew to build genuine everyday relationships, allowing workers to report issues much easier (P8).

Ultimately, sustaining these structural adjustments depends on cultivating a strong organisational identity where participants view themselves as a unified project team. Project managers could therefore consider creating more opportunities for direct interaction between groups through mixed coordination meetings, joint planning sessions, and collaborative problem-solving activities. Informal relationship-building activities, such as shared lunches or team-building events, were highlighted by respondents as valuable tools for reducing social distance and encouraging workers to communicate more openly (P1; P3; P13; P15). When managers and workers interact casually and learn each other's names, the psychological cost of communication drops significantly. These practices appear to help workers increasingly perceive themselves as part of a shared project team rather than as isolated national or organisational groups.

In summary, effective collaboration in multicultural construction teams depends on recognising and understanding differences in cultural backgrounds rather than ignoring them. In this sense, successful cooperation relies heavily on reducing ignorance and developing an active willingness to understand the perspectives of colleagues, rather than assuming that one approach to work is universally ‘correct’.

8. Conclusion

Modern Swedish construction sites are becoming increasingly culturally diverse environments (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2023). Migrants now play a key role in the functioning of the construction sector, and multicultural teams have become the norm rather than the exception. At the same time, the study shows that this diversity does not merely affect the language of communication or work organisation but also shapes the way in which professional reality is interpreted. It is precisely these differing ways of perceiving the same situations, rather than the mere presence of different nationalities, which have proved to be one of the most significant sources of tension, misunderstanding and fragmentation on construction sites.

The findings of the study indicate that participants in construction projects interpret their day-to-day professional practices through the prism of multiple overlapping cultural layers: experiences gained in their home countries, professional culture, and the organisational culture of their specific workplace. In practice, this means that issues such as hierarchy, safety, responsibility or communication can have completely different meanings for different groups of workers. Silence may be interpreted as understanding or as a sign of respect towards a superior. Safety procedures may be seen as a natural part of the job or as a formal obligation imposed from above. Direct communication, in contrast, may be perceived as professionalism or as a lack of respect.

The study also showed that tensions on multicultural construction sites do not stem solely from national differences. Occupational divisions and the project-based nature of the construction industry proved to be equally significant in shaping workplace dynamics and perceptions. Differences between manual workers and management often influenced perceptions of risk, procedures or work efficiency more strongly than nationality itself. These findings suggest that relying just on a national perspective is insufficient to understand the dynamics of multicultural construction sites. Instead, cultural fragmentation should be viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon emerging from the interaction of national, occupational and organisational cultures. It is the overlap of these distinct cultural layers that often leads project participants to assign different meanings to the same workplace situations.

A particularly important conclusion is that formal organisational systems do not always reflect actual practices on the construction site. Although the Swedish construction sector is based on a high level of regulation, safety and a participatory management model (Andersen &

Rasmussen, 2014; Grenness, 2003), day-to-day practice often requires improvisation, informal solutions and the adaptation of procedures to time pressures and the realities of the project. This creates a decoupling between the organisation's official values and the way it operates in practice.

At the same time, the findings show that cultural fragmentation does not necessarily lead only to conflict. Many respondents emphasised that, over time and through long-term cooperation, mutual trust increases and barriers between groups gradually diminish. Integration proved to be a process requiring not only language skills, but also an understanding of local organisational norms, communication styles and expectations regarding accountability. Building relationships and everyday experiences of collaboration played a key role here. The study's findings also suggest that the level of cultural fragmentation is significantly influenced not only by the differences between employees themselves, but also by the way working relationships between project participants are organised and the types of contracts used. A model based on an extensive subcontracting system and the employment of entire teams operating under their own supervision may reinforce divisions between groups of workers and hinder their day-to-day integration on the construction site.

The conclusions drawn from this study are of both theoretical and practical significance. From a theoretical perspective, the research shows the importance of understanding culture as a dynamic construct shaped by the interaction of organisational, occupational and national influences rather than a fixed characteristic associated solely with nationality. From a practical perspective, the results indicate that effective management of multicultural teams requires more than just formal procedures or translations of safety instructions. Above all, it requires an awareness that employees may interpret the same situations in different ways. The findings also indicate that decisions regarding the organisation of cooperation and forms of employment contracts affect not only economic and logistical issues, but also communication, levels of trust and social relations among project participants.

Future research could benefit from a more focused case-study approach involving a single construction site. Such a design would make it possible to explore how distinct groups of project participants interpret the same workplace situations and organisational practices. It would allow researchers to compare and contrast perspectives within a shared context. This could provide a deeper understanding of how cultural fragmentation develops in everyday project interactions and how different actors make sense of the same events. Longitudinal studies following a

project over time could further contribute to understanding how trust, cooperation and cultural integration evolve throughout the project lifecycle.

The main message of this paper is therefore that the challenges arising on multicultural construction sites stem not so much from cultural differences themselves as from differing ways of interpreting the same professional reality. Understanding these differences is key to creating safe, effective and more inclusive working environments.

Overall, the study shows that the future of the Swedish construction sector will depend not only on the ability to attract workers from different countries, but above all on the ability to create working environments in which cultural differences do not lead to exclusion and fragmentation, but form the basis for more effective cooperation across organisational and cultural boundaries. In an industry that relies on coordination, trust and safety, understanding how people perceive their professional reality becomes just as important as technical skills or the organisation of the construction process itself.

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