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## **'You should've told me that earlier': Ethnic return migrants' accounts of discrimination**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we take a discursive psychological approach to study how ethnic return migrants discuss and account for episodes of discrimination, with a special focus on discursive strategies employed to deal with discrimination. The data comes from nine focus group discussions held with ethnic Finnish migrants who have moved to Finland in adulthood from Russia, Canada or United States. Results of the analysis show two distinct ways of dealing with discrimination: problematising discrimination and downplaying discrimination. Problematising was accomplished by showing the critical difference between being categorised as Finnish or non-Finnish and challenging the criteria of Finnishness. Strategies of downplaying included normalising discrimination and emphasizing positive experiences. The findings are discussed in relation to ethnic return migrants' identity work and belonging to broader society.

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### **Introduction**

The vast majority of discursive psychological research on prejudice and racism has focused on how unequal relations and treatment of minority groups are maintained and legitimised by majority members through specific discursive strategies (see e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007). This research has shown how people may deny their own, others' or societal prejudice, discrimination and racism (e.g. Fozdar, 2008; Nelson, 2013; Tileaga, 2005; van Dijk, 1992; for a review, see Augoustinos & Every, 2007). Conversely, there has been limited discursive research on minority group members' first-hand accounts of discrimination (Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2013). In this paper, we look at how personal experiences of discrimination are brought up and oriented to in focus group discussions by ethnic return migrants after migration to the country of their ethnic origin.

Mainstream social psychological research has shown different ways in which minority group members make sense of discrimination experiences. It has also brought up the controversy of reporting discrimination. While some studies have pointed to the social costs of making accusations of discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2003), others have shown the usefulness of attributing rejection to general discrimination rather than to oneself (e.g., Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). Researchers employing a discursive approach have similarly pointed to the sensitive nature of ethnic and racial discrimination as a topic in social interaction and shown, for example, that accusations of discrimination or racism are often made with subtle and vague argumentation (e.g., Goodman, Burke, Liebling, & Zasada, 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2013; Riggs & Due, 2010). In Stokoe and Edwards's study (2007), victims of

discrimination also reported racial insults as part of a list of other complainable items, rather than as the primary business.

According to Verkuyten (2005), minority members may challenge the existence and seriousness of discrimination through, for example, making the claim of discrimination dependent on feelings or concerns of the victims. This kind of challenging works to not only uphold the majority's position but, notably, also to suggest possibilities for social mobility, working up a high degree of personal agency for minorities (Verkuyten, 2005). Similarly, Olakivi (2013) found that migrant care workers in Finland constructed discrimination and other problems at work as private matters that depend on individual and not institutional characteristics.

In a rare study focusing on migrants' accounts of discrimination, Kirkwood et al. (2013) found that refugees sometimes downplayed racial motivations or denied them completely when reporting violent acts committed against them. Accusations could be introduced in some cases by presenting them as coming from elsewhere, stating them tentatively or after other explanations were eliminated. The authors suggested that the downplaying of racial motivations in relation to negative treatment may function to justify speakers' presence in the new society; it may also pertain to the interactional difficulties involved in making claims of racism, including the possibility of being seen as a complainer. In similar vein, Goodman and colleagues (2014) have pointed to the difficulties faced by migrants, specifically refugees, in criticizing the host country while also attending to interactional requirements of displaying gratitude. In their study, participants managed the dilemma by downgrading complaints and claiming to be generally okay. The phenomenon of

minority members downplaying discrimination has also been reported in studies by Verkuyten (2005) and Varjonen, Arnold and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013).

Following Edwards (2005), complaints make available certain inferences about the speaker such as being over-sensitive, biased or a moaner. Hence, making complaints is not always straightforward, and this may be particularly true for minority group members. As Jingree and Finlay (2013) suggest, ‘when one relies on other people for support, complaining about them might not be an easy thing to do’ (p. 257). This is in line with previous research showing that claims of racism may be prohibited and punished (Dunn & Nelson, 2011; van Dijk, 1992), making other formulations such as bullying (Riggs & Due, 2010), prejudice (Goodman & Rowe, 2014), or the use of vague expressions (Whitehead, 2009) more socially acceptable.

In the current paper, we are interested in ethnic return migrants’ first-hand accounts of discrimination, and look at how the migrants orient to and make sense of discrimination in focus group discussions. Ethnic return migration has been defined as the ‘return’ of second- and later-generation descendants to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homelands for generations (Tsuda, 2009). As such, ethnic return migrants may be expected to belong to, and be accepted by, the ethno-national majority group more easily than other migrant groups. In practice, however, the belonging and identities of ethnic return migrants are often challenged and problematised in their ethnic home countries where they may be excluded and not be seen as part of the majority (see e.g., Mähönen, Varjonen, Prindiville, Arnold, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, submitted; Tsuda, 2003, 103-104; Varjonen et al., 2013). This complexity invites us to also pay attention to identity work done in and through

the accounts of discrimination. Within discourse analysis identity is not conceptualised as an individual's internal characteristic, but as socially constructed and constantly under construction (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe 2010). Identities can be analysed as conversational resources, with a focus on what people do and accomplish by using identities (Antaki, Condor & Levine, 1996). In line with this, we look at whether and how Finnishness and Finnish identities are taken up and used by the participants in the tellings of discrimination. We also discuss the implications of our findings in relation to return migrants' possibilities and ways of belonging in the broader society.

### ***Ethnic return migration in Finland***

In Finland, the biggest group of ethnic return migrants are ethnic Finns from Russia. Majority of them are Ingrian Finns; the descents of Finns who moved from Finland to Russia in the 1600-1900s. Other ethnic return migrants come from Western countries, including Canada and the United States, to which Finns immigrated in the early-mid 20th century. These groups' positions in Finnish society are, however, different. Ingrian Finns have been migrating to Finland under an official remigration policy since the 1990s, and due to historical antagonism between Finland and Russia, have faced negative attitudes from the broader public (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Solheim, 2009). Remigrants from North America often have Finnish citizenship, and typically come to the country for highly-skilled work or higher-education studies. Previous research has found that, generally speaking, migrants from Russia are among the least preferred immigrant groups in Finland while those from North America are the most preferred (e.g., Jaakkola, 2005).

## **Methods**

### ***Data***

The data analysed in this study comes from nine focus groups held with ethnic migrants in Finland. Four focus groups were held with migrants from Canada and the United States (Extracts 1-3 of the analysis) and five were held with migrants from Russia (Extracts 4-5).<sup>1</sup> The groups varied in size from two to six people; in total, 34 people (11 men and 23 women) took part in the sessions. Participants were invited to the focus groups to discuss their experiences of living in Finland. All participants identified as having Finnish roots and had migrated to the country as adults. Of those focus groups conducted with migrants from Russia, four were conducted in Russian and one in Finnish, while the sessions with migrants from North America were done in English. All participants were fluent in the language of the focus group session they attended. The sessions were moderated by one of the authors, or in two cases, by a research assistant while one of the authors was present. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed; the recordings lasted between 67 and 123 minutes, with an average of 91 minutes. The extracts seen in the current paper that were originally in Russian were double-checked against the original language transcript by the authors to ensure accuracy. Semi-structured question guides were used with questions related to migration, integration and identity. There were no specific questions concerning discrimination in the guides, but participants frequently referred to their experiences of discrimination and exclusion when discussing other migration-related topics introduced by the moderator. In line with discursive psychology's interest in focusing on what counts as a concern to speakers

rather than the researchers (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004), we decided to pay closer attention to accounts of discrimination in our focus group data, framing our research question broadly as ‘How are first-hand experiences of discrimination oriented to by ethnic Finnish return migrants?’

### ***Analytical Approach***

In our analysis we have adopted a discursive psychological approach, which treats language use as a form of social action. Within this perspective language is not seen as a simple means to refer to things ‘out there’, but rather as a construction site in which actions and meanings are produced for various purposes through text and talk (e.g., Nikander, 2008; Potter & Edwards, 2001). The idea of socially shared discursive resources is also at the core of this approach. As Wetherell and Edley (1999) point out, people’s talk reflects not just the local pragmatics of a particular conversational context, but also broader, collective patterns of sense-making and understanding. Accordingly, social psychological concepts such as identities are approached as produced contextually in social interaction, from various available social repertoires (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). In a conversational context, identity construction can be analysed, for instance, in terms of how people position themselves and others through what they say (see e.g., Davies & Harré's (1990) discussion of ‘reflexive’ and ‘interactive positioning’).

Following a social psychological definition of discrimination as ‘unjustifiable negative behaviour towards a group or its members’ (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Dovidio, & Penner, 2010, 85), we collected all accounts in the focus group data in which the ethnic migrants described

an instance of personally experienced negative treatment and exclusion from the group of majority Finns. It is worth noting that, in their accounts of mistreatment and exclusion, the speakers very rarely (and never in the current paper's extracts) explicitly used the term discrimination, and the words prejudice and racism were never used. This is in line with findings of Riggs and Due (2010) that accusations of racism are made via subtle, vague arguments in which the word 'racism' is frequently not even mentioned.

In our analysis, we focused on how the episodes of discrimination were jointly made sense of and oriented to by focus group participants, paying special attention to the discursive strategies employed to deal with discrimination. In doing so, we considered the accounts to be co-constructed by speakers and not objective reports of what 'actually' happened. Using focus group discussions instead of the one-on-one individual interviews used by many other researchers (e.g. Goodman et al., 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2013) enabled us to look at the discursive functions of different orientations—not only in terms of how minority-majority relations are produced, but also in terms of local positioning taking place in focus group interaction among minority group members.

## **Analysis**

In this section, we present an analysis of five extracts from our focus group data, which together illustrate two distinctive ways in which personal discrimination experiences were oriented to in the discussions: *problematizing discrimination* and *downplaying discrimination*.

### ***Problematizing discrimination***



In our data, discrimination was problematised through the following strategies: 1) showing the critical difference between being categorised as Finnish or non-Finnish when it comes to the treatment one receives and 2) challenging the criteria used for categorising someone as Finnish or not. In all accounts of discrimination presented in this sub-section, speakers make relevant their own Finnishness in response to being excluded from Finnishness—either as part of the resolution of the narrated discrimination episode or within the evaluation of the episode. This is in line with previous discursive research, which has found that taking up a particular identity can allow a speaker to successfully make certain claims (e.g., Hansen, 2005; Jurva & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015).

In the first extract, the first strategy of problematising—highlighting the difference between being considered a Finn and not a Finn—is particularly apparent. Here speaker G constructs the setting of the discrimination episode in a way that makes available her identity as an American. The categorisation as an American is implied as the trigger for discrimination, while ‘doing Finnishness’ functions as a resolution in the telling of the episode.

Extract 1
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1	G:	actually (.) twice in Finland I have been <u>spit on</u> (.) by
2		Finnish people. Uh once was in (( <u>small city</u> )) (.) I was
3		with my cousin [name] and she lived in Texas for a
4		year and picked up a <u>remarkably</u> (.) perfect Texas
5		accent. We were- after the bar we went to ((Finnish fast
6		food restaurant)) we're eating cheeseburgers (.) and
7		((cousin's name)) she's a bigger girl also. So I mean (.)
8		she's very <u>Texas</u> (.) looking.
9	H:	stereotypes
10	G:	yeah
11	H:	yeah
12	G:	so she's speaking in her Texas drawl I'm speaking
13		English and some guy comes up and (.) <u>spits</u> on (.) our
14		table and like (.) says like <u>go</u> (.) like go fuck yourselves
15		and ((cousin)) just all the sudden like whoooo turns
16		around and like blalalalala like (.) you know <u>haista sinä</u>
17		<u>vittu</u> blalala like going off in Finnish and this guy is
18		like whoa whoa, like antees antees

In Extract One, speaker G initially presents the discriminatory act in a matter-of-fact way, with little hesitation, which simultaneously works to discount the possibility of it being random or unlucky: ‘twice in Finland I have been spit on by Finnish people’ (ll. 1-2). The relevance of an (ascribed) American identity for the recounted episode is constructed by offering several details (ll. 3-12) of how G’s cousin could be seen by others as American, specifically Texan (‘having lived in Texas for a year, ‘a remarkably perfect Texas accent’, ‘a bigger girl’, ‘very Texas-looking’). G being seen as American is oriented to here as a common-sense fact, as she states only that she was speaking English (ll. 12-13). The described context of the narrative, eating cheeseburgers at a fast-food chain further contributes to the construction of the pair as appearing prototypically American. This construction is flagged by H as stereotypical (line 9), and confirmed as such by corroborating ‘yeah’ from both F and H.

The discriminatory act, being spat at and name-called, is depicted in lines 12-14 as a sudden event that occurred in the middle of G and her cousin's conversation. One function of this type of vivid telling is the rendering of the event as factual (Potter, 1996). G takes the voice of the spitter ('go fuck yourselves', l. 14), working up a negative appraisal of the event that should be shared by listeners (see Holt, 2000). The matter of identity becomes crucial in this extract not only in terms of the explanation for the negative treatment but also for how the situation is resolved. In lines 15-17, again depicting a quick reaction, G states that her cousin 'just all of a sudden, like turns around' to respond to the spitter with a roughly equivalent 'fuck you' in Finnish ('haista sinä vittu' ll. 16-17).

Here, responding to the attack in Finnish works to demonstrate G's cousin's Finnish ingroup identity. The effectiveness of this response is further reinforced when the spitter is described as surprised ('whoa, whoa'), which also solicits an apology ('anteeks, anteeks'<sup>2</sup>), ending the episode. Being categorised as non-Finnish—and American in particular—is constructed as a problematic position in which one is vulnerable to sudden outbursts of discrimination from total strangers. On the other hand, displaying Finnish identity either by responding in Finnish or being affiliated with a Finn (who, in this instance, speaks also for G) functions in the telling as a way to not only put an end to negative treatment but to assert agency and embarrass the perpetrator by implying that he has miscategorised his victims as non-Finnish.

Language was often referred to in our data to demonstrate belonging or not belonging in a particular group, which mirrors Olakivi's (2013) findings where language talk—as opposed to ethnicity talk—was commonly used to denote difference in interviews with

foreign-born practical nurses in Finland. This is also in line with Sala, Dandy and Rapley (2010) who point out that language and accent can be brought forward in talk to address the authenticity of one's group membership.

Extract Two begins with H constructing Finland as a place where those perceived not Finnish are generally treated with suspicion (ll. 1-3). This description paves the way for H to present her own experience of discrimination as having shared elements with many other people's experiences while also bringing up the issue of skin colour (ll. 3-4) as a further dimension relevant to how she is perceived in Finland. In this extract, the importance of physical appearance is jointly constructed as crucial for how one is perceived by the Finnish majority.

Extract 2
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1	H:	I feel like people get like you said (.) people get <u>painted</u>
2		with this <u>wide</u> brush (.) you know of why they're here
3		(.) and they get <u>judged</u> about stuff and I feel like for <u>me</u>
4		(.) being a person of color like (.) <u>people</u> will judge me
5		(.) and then if I <u>mention</u> (.) that my <u>mother's Finnish</u> (.)
6		<u>all of a sudden</u> (.) whoooooo (.) oooooh (.) you
7		should've told me that earlier
8	MOD:	really?
9	H:	<u>yeah</u>
10	G:	(.) yeah I could definitely see that happening in Savo
11		((laughter))
12	K:	yeah, in Tornio as well
13	H:	I met (.) I met a woman who is the (.) ((position of
14		authority in)) tourism in ((American city)) (.)
15		representing Finland
16	MOD:	okay
17	H:	and she could not <u>believe</u> (.) she asked me like three
18		times (.) your <u>mom's</u> really Finnish? (.) is your mom
19		really Finnish? (.) I <u>met her</u> because she's friends with
20		one of my mom's friends (.) and she's like (.) is your
21		mom <u>really</u> Finnish
22	MOD:	[mmm]
23	H:	[looking] me up and down.

The first strategy of problematising discrimination, highlighting the difference between being considered a Finn and not a Finn, is used on lines 1-7. After Moderator's response 'Really?', other participants join in and offer corroborating responses (ll. 10-12) naming rural locations in Finland ('Savo' and 'Tornio', which have only small visible minority populations) as examples and stating that the scenario described by H is plausible also in these places. This could indicate that the moderator's response is heard as questioning the factuality of the notion that one's skin colour makes a crucial difference in whether one is assumed to be Finnish, or simply as expressing surprise towards the recounted event. In either case, this acknowledgement from others present works to construct also them as

knowledgeable about discrimination (following e.g., Verkuyten, 2005). Further, while (some aspect of) Finnishness is first depicted as something to be asserted to receive better treatment (ll. 5-7), in a more specific telling of the discrimination (ll. 13-23) claiming Finnishness is constructed as a difficult—if not an impossible—claim to make, for a person of colour in Finland. Discrimination is constructed, in this sense, not only as a matter of race but also in terms of what race means in relation to the possibilities of being Finnish. This follows, for example, Leddy-Owen's (2014) discussion of English identity being constructed in relation to essentialised boundaries of whiteness.

The details of how the perpetrator is described, specifically the internationally-gearred work she does (which suggests that she might be more open-minded), the close connection to the speaker's mother, and the repetition of the question 'your mom's really Finnish?' as well as mentioning how H was looked 'up and down' help to construct the description of the event as factual. Highlighting the absurdity of the event and portraying the narrow understanding of Finnishness as ridiculous and unreasonable, this account also serves as an example of the second discursive strategy of problematising discrimination: challenging the criteria used for categorising someone as Finnish. In addition, the account can be interpreted as criticising the requirement of proving one's Finnishness.

Extract 3 provides the most explicit example of problematising discrimination by using the strategy of challenging the criteria of Finnishness. In this extract, being seen as a non-Finn through appearance and accent is constructed as a frequent problem that is difficult to avoid. Unlike in the previous extracts, where displaying Finnishness served as a potential resolution to discrimination in the telling, 'doing Finnishness' in this excerpt functions to

position the victim as innocent and undeserving of discriminatory treatment.

Extract 3		
1	O:	um for me (.) I've (.) uh even though (.) I didn't have
2		so many (.) childhood experiences in Finland because
3		of (.) our connection was a few (.) generations (.) but
4		I've spent so much time here and I've gotten I have sort
5		of gone out of my way to learn as much (.) about my
6		new (.) cultural details as possible but then in my (.)
7		line of work (.) at least (.) at least once a month it- it's
8		brought up to me (.) that I'm not from here and it
9		usually has to do with um (.) telling an intoxicated Finn
10		that I'm not going to sell them anymore alcohol (.) or
11		that they have to leave the bar (.) and then (.) they will
12		pick up on (.) the accent (.) and they also like actually
13		pick up on the fact that my eyes aren't <u>blue</u>
14	Others:	(mild laughter)
15	V:	like all [Finns are]
16	O:	[and um]
17	V:	blue-eyed heh heh
18	O:	well (.) so I've been (.) um (.) 'vitun mamu' 'saatanan
19		<u>neekeri</u> ' like all kinds of (.) really heh heh great so (.)
20		as-as much as I to-to think that I (.) fit in and my
21		<u>friends</u> have told me that, they don't even notice
22		anymore that (.) I'm not heh heh really from here (.)
23		there's always going to be someone it seems who is
24		going to remind me (.) of this

According to Edwards and Potter (1992), reports of events are designed to resist attempts to be undermined as false, partial or interested, thus inviting particular interpretations and weakening others (p. 164). At the beginning of the extract, the possibility of O being responsible for discrimination he experiences (see Verkuyten, 2005) is oriented towards, as O emphasizes the amount of time he has spent in Finland and his efforts to learn about his 'new cultural details' (ll. 1-6). Later, he states that he thinks that he 'fits in' and that his friends do

not notice anymore that he is not from Finland (ll. 20-22). This could be seen as one way of displaying Finnish identity and successful integration, and works to discount the possibility of him being blamed. Thus it also heightens the complainability of being discriminated against.

O describes the acts of exclusion and discrimination first in fairly neutral and passive terms (in ll. 7-8: 'it's brought up to me (.) that I'm not from here'), which along with the present tense used, emphasizes the habitual nature of being positioned as not Finnish. O then specifies the context in which being identified as a non-Finn usually takes place: cutting off alcohol from a Finn in a bar where O works (ll. 8-11). The consequence of taking this action towards the perpetrator (signalled by 'and then') is that some characteristics, specifically an accent and not having blue eyes (ll. 11-13), are 'picked up on' as markers of outgroup membership. O's use of 'actually' on line 12 seems to highlight the triviality of eye colour as an indication of lacking Finnishness. Discrimination is jointly problematised here with also others challenging the criteria of Finnishness. This is done through laughter and participant V's response 'like all Finns are blue-eyed, heh heh' (ll. 14-17), which can be taken as corroborating statements signalling support for the idea of this characteristic as trivial and therefore judging the othering as ungrounded. O then continues his account of discrimination by contrasting his potential for an insider status (as someone who fits in and whose friends no longer notice him as 'not being from here') with how he is positioned through derogatory name-calling: 'vitun mamu' and 'saatanan neekeri' (ll. 18-19, loosely translated into English as 'fucking immigrant' and 'fucking nigger', in line with Stokoe and Edwards' (2007) findings of the two-word format of racial slurs).



Although the account in part suggests that avoiding certain actions (in this case, cutting off a person at the bar) could, at least, avoid some of the negative treatment, being seen as non Finnish is nevertheless constructed as commonplace and almost unavoidable. While the overall episode follows a narrative format, it is not told as a single event but rather something that happens repeatedly. This is accomplished, for example, by referring to the frequent nature of these experiences ‘at least (.) at least once a month’ (line 7), and indicating that this type of discrimination will also continue in the future: ‘there’s always going to be someone it seems who is going to remind me (.) of this’ (ll. 23-24). Furthermore, slightly later (not in the extract) O alludes to the idea that such experiences are shared by other non-Finns by stating he feels more comfortable spending time with his Turkish friends as ‘at least on some levels we have more in common’.

The three previous extracts have brought forward two strategies of problematising discrimination in our data: showing the critical difference between treatment received when one is seen as Finn as compared to when not, and challenging the criteria used for categorising people as Finns. Notably, detailed descriptions of the discrimination episodes were given in the tellings—possibly for the audience to judge for themselves—instead of making strong direct claims of Finnish society or majority members being racist, prejudiced or discriminatory. This may function to further heighten the complainability of the event; giving a seemingly objective account of an episode may help sidestep potential accusations of, for instance, one’s own behaviour provoking the treatment or simply being biased against the majority. In the next section we will present another way of orienting towards discrimination as used in our focus groups: *downplaying discrimination*.

### *Downplaying discrimination*

Previous research has found downplaying to be one way of addressing discrimination in personal accounts, especially in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, who rely on the support of broader society (Goodman et al., 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2013). As ethnic migrants, participants of our study can be seen to be in a less vulnerable position compared to refugees. Notably, we also found examples of downplaying in our data, as seen in the next two extracts.

In the Extract 4, the discrimination episode is first presented in vague terms and then downplayed. Unlike in Extract 1 in which speaking English was presented as problematic—implying that speaking Finnish would have avoided the episode of discrimination—here knowing Finnish is the reason that insults are recognized (ll. 1-3). The original Russian versions of Extracts 4 and 5 may be found in Appendix 2.

Extract 4		
1	W:	well after all knowing the language was an advantage
2		but sometimes it was bad if I heard
3		what is said behind my back I didn't like this either
4	Y:	what was said?
5	W:	what was said? Ryssä (.) maassa maan tavalla (.) like
6		sort of when we commute and talk Russian (.) well (.)
7		that it is like (.) it is not all (.) well (.) it can be some
8		sort of (.) I do not know well (.) well it happens (.) well
9		but in general (.) it is okay I like it a lot (.) if you keep
10		the order (.) if you maintain laws everything is right (.)
11		all is fine

Discrimination, other people speaking behind one's back, is initially evaluated negatively ('I didn't like this', line 3). After participant Y asking 'what was said?', W quotes

in Finnish ‘Ryssä, maassa maan tavalla’; ‘Russki, when in Rome do as the Romans do’ and describes the context of the event. From then onwards, hedging and softening takes place starting in line 7 (‘it is not all (.) well (.) it can be some sort of (.) I do not know well’) working to downplay discrimination and avoiding evaluating the host society negatively (Kirkwood et al., 2013). The vague expression ‘well it happens’ could be seen as simultaneously orienting towards the factuality of name calling while also normalising it, implying that such events are regular and un-notable. W then also emphasizes how well things are in Finland (l. 9), which is described first in moderate terms (‘it is okay’) and then more positively (‘I like it a lot’). One consequence of this is that it constructs the speaker as someone who is managing where she is. As Goodman and colleagues (2014) found in their study of asylum seekers’ talk about difficulties in their host country, claiming to be okay but not happy points to a need to appear not too dissatisfied with current conditions. Interestingly, the matter is treated here as one of personal responsibility and therefore potentially resolvable by suggesting that one’s own behaviour determines the outcome: (‘if you keep the order (.) if you maintain laws everything is right (.) all is fine’ ll. 9-11). This is in line with Verkuyten’s (2005) finding that downplaying discrimination may be done by claiming discrimination to be dependent on the concerns and feelings of minority members themselves. Further, this also functions as repair to earlier report of discrimination and positions the speaker as someone who is not a ‘whinger’ (see Kirkwood et al., 2013).

In Extract Five, the seriousness of discrimination, and how one should deal with it, is jointly discussed and contested by the focus group participants. In the analysis of this extract, we focus on the implications that downplaying discrimination has for the positionings made

among and between the participants.

Extract 5		
1	MOD:	but what do you think helps and what on the hand
2		hinders adaptation? You said that language is a very
3		important factor (.) and in your opinion (.) are there
4		other things that facilitate or help you to adapt?
5	L:	I don't even know. I want to say (.) that those (.) with
6		whom I need to interact are very nice people. Finns of
7		course understand (.) that I am not a Finn (.) but they
8		are always very nice. It surprises you of course. You
9		are replied to friendly and everything is very
10		pleasant. Not once has it happened
11		[that I was replied to somehow abruptly or something].
12	V:	[Yes, yes, same here]
13	M:	No, they don't reply abruptly but rather keep quiet and
14		[in general pretend (.) that you don't exist at all (.) it
15		often happens to us]
16	L:	[ <u>It hasn't happened</u> (.) I haven't had such a situation]
17		(.) there has not been such a situation (.) in which I
18		would have been ignored if I ask something
19	N:	I don't pay attention to such small things. In Russia
20		there are those situations as well. For instance today I
21		was searching for an address (.) I approached three
22		people. They pretended not to hear me. But still (.)
23		then I approached one lady, who explained. And
24		overall (.) as much as I have worked (.) Finland (.) I
25		also think (.) I was somehow very lucky with people.
26		That's why (.) when I had this incident
27		with my neighbour <sup>3</sup> (.) but still I managed to solve this
28		situation (.) because I think that in Russia as often (.)
29		yes, this (.) this is not the real reason.
30	L:	Yes, it is just like that, [pure coincidence]
31	N:	[yes, yes]
32	L:	depends (.) what kinds of people you meet along your
33		way.

Here Speaker L, the first participant to respond to the moderator's question regarding adaptation, interestingly does not directly answer the question at all. Instead she states that

Finns have always been nice to her despite the fact that she is not a Finn. It is as if L is responding to a different question, namely, 'have you experienced discrimination'. By defining lack of discrimination as surprising she orients towards the commonly shared idea that being recognized and categorised as non-Finnish makes one vulnerable for discrimination—a notion familiar from the previous extracts. Offering evidence for having oneself adapted in the sense of being accepted by Finns could be read as a way of distancing oneself from the prototypical story of difficulties in adaptation. It may also work to construct a position as an exceptional migrant, perhaps implicitly suggesting some personal merits, especially on lines 16-18, after M has stated that she has had negative experiences.

M's position in this small group interaction, on the other hand, becomes somewhat marginalized in the sense that there are no corroborative statements offered by other participants who are, rather, distancing their descriptions of their personal experiences from those of M's. While M states that it *often* happens to her that people pretend she does (or they do) not exist, other participants either state that they have *not* experienced such negative treatment (L on lines 10-11 and lines 16-18, and V stating 'yes, yes, same here' on line 12) or that they do not pay attention to such things (N on line 19). The actual account of a specific event of discrimination is now given by N who refers to a situation similar to one that M has defined as problematic. N employs this account to position herself in contrast to M, displaying a position of someone who is knowledgeable about instances of Finns ignoring those seen as non-Finns, but who would not be personally bothered or insulted by this.

N's definition of not getting a response from Finns as a small thing, which she does not pay attention to, together with the jointly produced theory by N and L of potential

negative instances being about luck (ll. 30-33), implicitly portrays M as having a wrong attitude towards these instances and complaining about trivial things. This is in line with Verkuyten's (2005) findings of minority group members suggesting that some immigrants are simply too sensitive to discrimination. Downplaying the seriousness of being ignored by Finns together with N's statement that similar things happen in Russia also normalise discriminatory behaviour by presenting it as widespread. A similar universality explanation was found also in the refugees' accounts of discrimination in the study by Kirkwood and colleagues (2013). Both universality and luck theories suggest that these types of events are uncontrollable and ordinary by nature, making it difficult to name these as discriminatory acts or blaming Finns as responsible for discrimination. Rather, it becomes the victims' responsibility to accept that these things happen and to learn to cope without making too much of them.

In this extract, downplaying discrimination is not a way to mitigate a complaint to meet the needs of interactional concerns in the sense described by, for example, Goodman and colleagues (2014). It instead functions here to achieve a positive identity for those doing downplaying as well adapted and morally better than those who complain about discrimination.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this paper, we have taken a discursive psychological approach to study how episodes of first-hand experiences of discrimination are jointly discussed in focus group discussions with ethnic return migrants in Finland. The analysis has specifically focused on the strategies

employed to deal with discrimination. We will now sum up our findings and discuss them in relation to ethnic return migrants' identity work and belonging to broader society.

In the presented accounts of discrimination, being categorised as non-Finnish was constructed by referring to speaking English or Russian (rather than Finnish) in public (extracts 1 and 4), speaking Finnish with an accent (extract 3) or not having 'typically' Finnish physical attributes (extracts 2 and 3), and linking this with a description of negative treatment received. Instances of discrimination included name-calling, being spat at, being judged and questioned on one's Finnishness, being talked behind one's back and being ignored. In these tellings, there were two main ways of orienting towards discrimination: problematising and downplaying.

*Problematising discrimination* was achieved through two different strategies: showing the critical difference between being categorised as Finnish or non-Finnish when it comes to the treatment one receives (extracts 1 and 2), and challenging the criteria of Finnishness used in categorisation (extracts 2 and 3 in particular). Finnishness, thus, functioned as a discursive resource and a feature of both of the two strategies used when problematising discrimination. It is interesting to consider these findings in relation to Jurva & Jasinskaja-Lahti's (2015) study in the same ethnic remigration context, which highlighted how certain constructions of Finnishness could be used to explain one's 'return' migration as highly desirable, as well as to work up a strong sense of natural belonging to Finnish society even before their move. Also in the current study Finnishness was actively taken up and put to use either in the telling as part of the resolution to the discrimination episode or as part of the evaluation of the episode. However, when problematising discrimination the focus group participants did not rely on the

straight-forward argument that, as Finns, they should not experience negative treatment. Rather, the strategies employed can be seen to subtly criticise the ‘requirement’ of being Finnish or having to prove one’s Finnishness in order to avoid discrimination.

In contrast to accounts where discrimination was problematised, Finnishness was not in an important role in the extracts in which discrimination was downplayed. In those extracts Finnishness of the victims was either not referred to (Extract 4) or the speakers explicitly categorised themselves as not being Finnish (Extract 5). *Downplaying discrimination* was accomplished by emphasising that things generally are okay and by focusing on migrants’ responsibilities and concerns. Instances were also redefined in talk by defining bad treatment as a matter of luck or by normalising such experiences. Previous research has explained such findings for instance in relation to general interactional difficulties in making complaints or specifically in the case of refugees and asylum seekers in terms of normative pressures for minority members to be grateful to majority members (Goodman et al., 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2013). While downplaying done in Extracts 4 and 5 can also be seen as orienting, in different ways, towards the interactional difficulties related to complaining, it seems that this is not the main function of downplaying in our data. We interpret the presented instances of downplaying primarily as acts of constructing belonging. This is in line with an idea also brought forward by Kirkwood and colleagues (2013) that denying discrimination or racism may relate to potential membership of the host society. For ethnic Finnish return migrants, who may identify (and who are also sometimes expected to identify) as Finns, being discriminated against by majority group members may be a particularly sensitive issue and difficult to reconcile with belonging. Downplaying discrimination may function for the group



at hand as a way to manage the paradoxical situation in which one may be seen as a stranger in the country of one's ethnic origin. Our findings also speak to other, local interactional functions of downplaying discrimination, such as constructing a position of moral superiority, as seen in Extract 5.

Interestingly, in our data, all the examples of extreme downplaying first-hand events of discrimination came from the participants who had migrated from Russia. Explaining why this might be is beyond the scope of this discursive study. However, cultural differences in how discrimination is perceived in North America and Russia, may play a role, as may the fact that ethnic Finnish migrants coming from Russia have more distant Finnish roots compared to those coming from North America—therefore, Finnish identity as a resource may be more available for some individuals than others. Further, majority members' attitudes towards people coming from Russia are generally more negative, making their position in Finland more vulnerable<sup>4</sup> and, in this sense, group members may be less inclined to 'rock the boat'.

From the point of view of discursive psychology, it is interesting to consider the social consequences of problematising and downplaying discrimination. In light of these accounts of ethnic Finnish return migrants being discriminated against, discrimination appears first and foremost as a problem, which the migrants themselves must handle. This may be interpreted as reflecting discursive features of complaint-making more generally: managing the subjective side of complaint-making by avoiding being seen as a habitual complainer or overly sensitive (Edwards, 2005). This aspect was most apparent in the examples of downplaying discrimination. However, the accounts in which discrimination was

problematised also pointed towards the responsibility of the victim in the sense that the described episodes suggest that, to avoid or stop discrimination, one should demonstrate—or make evident—one’s Finnishness. One unfortunate consequence of such an emphasis is that the role of society and majority members as responsible for fighting and addressing discrimination as a general phenomenon seems to be put aside.

Despite the very specific group of migrants at the heart of this study, we believe that our findings have implications for other migrant or minority groups. Both problematising and downplaying may be used in attempts to achieve belonging in the new home countries of ethnic return migrants as well as other immigrants. While downplaying seemingly makes discrimination ‘disappear’ (Kirkwood et al., 2013), problematising discrimination by using, for example, identity as a resource can challenge and increase the permeability of the borders of the majority group.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that two of the 'Russian' groups consisted of ethnically Finnish people whose ancestors first moved from Finland to North America in the early 1900s and, later, moved to Russia. The other three 'Russian' groups were made up of Ingrian Finns who were participating in the research for the second time, as they had been interviewed already once in Russia prior to their migration.

<sup>2</sup> 'sorry, sorry'

<sup>3</sup> Refers to an episode described earlier in the session, in which an upstairs neighbour complained for no good reason.



## Appendix B. Transcription conventions

(.)	Short pause of less than one second
(2)	Pause measured to the nearest second
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
?	Unidentified speaker
((comments))	Comments from the transcriber

## Appendix 2. Original Russian language extracts

### Extract 4.

- O: Ну потом эээ знание языка это помогало но иногда это было плохо если слышала что говорят в след это мне тоже не нравилось
- E: Ну а что говорили?
- O: Ну вот что? Ryssä (.) maassa maan tavalla (.) если как бы вот мы едем и по-русски беседуем (.) ну вот (.) вот такое (.) но это не все (.) это ну (.) это может какие-нибудь (.) я не знаю ну (.) ну вот это встречается (.) ну вот а так (.) ничего мне очень нравится (.) порядок если ты поддерживаешь порядок (.) законы поддерживаешь всё правильно (.) всё прекрасно

### Extract 5.

- И: а что вы думаете (.) помогает (.) а что с другой стороны мешает адаптации? Вот язык (.) вы говорили (.) является важным фактором (.) а еще какие-то такие моменты (.) которые (.) вы думаете (.) как-то способствуют или помогают вам адаптироваться?
- Л: ну даже и не знаю (.) хочу сказать (.) что очень приветливый народ (.) вот с кем приходится общаться. Ну они же понимают финны (.) что я не финка (.) но всегда очень приветливы. Это поражает (.) конечно. Приветливо тебе ответят и все очень

- приятно. У меня не было ни одного случая,  
[чтобы мне как-то грубо ответили или что-то]
- В: [да-да, то же самое]
- М: Нет, грубо они не ответят они лучше промолчат и  
[вообще сделают вид (.) что тебя вообще нет (.)  
у нас так часто бывает]
- Л: [ну не было такого (.) у меня не было такой ситуации] (.)  
ситуации такой не было, чтобы как-то меня  
игнорировали, если обращаюсь с вопросом
- Н: я на такие мелочи не обращаю внимание. В России  
тоже такие ситуации. Вот я ж сегодня искала адрес (.)  
я подошла к троим (.) сделали вид (.) меня не слышат (.)  
но все равно (.) потом подошла (.) женщина объяснила. Ну  
а вообще я сколько работала (.) Финляндия (.) я тоже  
считаю как-то очень везло мне с людьми позитивно (.)  
поэтому вот у меня инцидент  
с этой соседкой (.) но и то я эту ситуацию  
разглядела, потому что я думаю и в России так же часто (.)  
да, это (.) это не та причина
- Л: Да (.) это чисто так (.) [дело случая]
- Н: [да, да]
- Л: какие люди встретятся на пути