

# Integration in the Czech Republic as Seen from the Perspective of Intercultural Workers

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## Abstract

This text focuses on aspects of the integration of immigrants from the perspective of intercultural workers. The qualitative research explored how intercultural workers in the Czech Republic perceive and understand integration, with special emphasis on their interpretation of what makes a successfully integrated immigrant. Our conclusions indicate the predominance of a dualistic view of integration based on the acquisition of Czech language skills and the achievement of self-sufficiency. The culturally determined behavior of immigrants can significantly influence their cooperation with the majority society in areas such as education and their orientation in the social system. This research contributes to understanding the integration of immigrants and reveals a complex interplay of language, self-reliance, cultural prejudices, and the role of intercultural workers in facilitating mutual understanding between new arrivals and the majority population.

## Keywords

integration, intercultural work, intercultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

Intercultural work is normally categorized as a specialized field within social work. It is devoted to the study of immigrants and the facilitation of culture contacts between immigrants and members of the dominant culture. Berry (2009) states, “No cultural group remains unchanged following culture contact ...” As a profession, intercultural work combines knowledge from the fields of mediation, intercultural communication, community interpreting, and migration studies. Intercultural workers provide assistance such as language interpretation services in negotiations between immigrants and public institutions. They support the coexistence between the majority population and immigrants, and facilitate the integration of immigrants into society (Dohnalová 2014: 74). The establishment of the profession has been a long and highly politicized process, which is closely related to general attitudes toward immigrants in societies. In most countries, intercultural workers are immigrants themselves or people with a migrant background.

Intercultural work was pioneered in the Czech Republic in the project, “Forming the Profession of Sociocultural Mediator: Inspiration from the Portuguese Model”, which was carried out between 2012 and 2014 by InBáze, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, in partnership with the Portuguese High Commissioner for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue (Palašćáková 2014: 9). The profession of intercultural worker is not based in law. Between 2019 and 2022, InBáze organized accredited courses for intercultural workers in partnership with Charles University in Prague (Inkluze interkulturně 2023).

This research presents findings on the role of intercultural work in facilitating the integration process in the Czech Republic. Most support for immigrants in the Czech Republic is mediated by non-governmental organizations, which are partly funded by city administrations or state institutions (Kožíšek – Makúch 2019: 3). Local non-governmental organizations offer a wide spectrum of assistance, ranging from social, legal, and psychosocial counseling to programs for families with children, community centers and workshops, courses in Czech language, and various social events. Sometimes such assistance includes the services of intercultural workers.

The aim of this research was to analyze how the concept of “integration” is understood, interpreted, and applied by intercultural workers both as a process and a final stage towards which their clients need to be guided. The study focused on the way in which intercultural workers support the process of integration and what they consider helpful strategies and ob-

stacles in integration. The researchers' objective was to provide answers to the following questions:

- What does “integration” mean to intercultural workers?
- What obstacles or barriers exist from the perspective of intercultural workers in the process of assisting the integration of immigrants?
- What practices to support the process of integration do they perceive as constructive?
- How do intercultural workers assist in intercultural contact?

One goal of intercultural work is to motivate immigrants and share knowledge in order to empower them to deal with everyday situations independently. Intercultural work involves assisting with liaising with local authorities, medical centers, schools, and other institutions and easing tensions that may arise between immigrants and locals. Intercultural workers often assist their clients in interactions with public or commercial health insurance providers, police departments, and the post office. They are expected to be skilled at intercultural communication and to possess a high degree of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2011) and cultural sensitivity (Janebová 2013). Deardorff (2011) describes intercultural competence as an ongoing process of learning about different cultures with an attitude of respect, curiosity and openness. Intercultural competence manifests itself differently depending on the culture. Janebová (2013) equates intercultural sensitivity with an empathetic understanding of the experiences of different cultures, along with conscious resistance to cultural prejudice and closed-mindedness. Intercultural workers are trained in intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk – Brislin 1992). The term denotes the ability to notice differences rooted in culture and the willingness to change one's behavior in order to show respect for people of other cultures.

The field research was conducted by a second-generation Polish immigrant with long-term Czech residency, who was born in Warsaw and spent her childhood and early adulthood in Prague. Due to her ethnicity and proficiency in the Czech language, with no hint of a foreign accent, the majority of the population assumes she is a Czech national. While she had been living in the country, she experienced a certain prejudice against Polish people on a number of occasions, notably when speaking Polish in public. Her own experience with Czech bureaucracy has made her skeptical about the society's openness to foreigners. As a result of her binational upbringing, she feels she is more like a citizen of Europe than of a particular country.

## 1a. Integration through the lens of the law

In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of the Interior, particularly its Department for Asylum and Migration Policy, is in charge of the country's integration policy. According to the government report *Procedures for the Implementation of the Integration of Foreigners Policy 2023*, the primary target group for integration measures is immigrants from "third countries," i.e., not countries in the EU or its partner countries, who are long-term, legal residents of the Czech Republic (Usnesení 2022: 6). The document states that half of all foreigners living in the Czech Republic who originate from third countries have legal permanent residence and thus the same rights as Czech citizens apart from the right to vote. The government report identifies five main priorities for the integration of immigrants: knowledge of the Czech language; economic self-sufficiency; orientation in society; the development of mutual relations between communities; and the gradual acquisition of rights by immigrants based on their length of stay (Usnesení 2022: 7–8).

The objective of integration policy is to ensure the smooth and mutually beneficial coexistence between immigrants and the majority population. It is explicitly stipulated that integrating foreigners is crucial to maintaining social cohesion and economic, social, and cultural development (Integrace cizinců 2023). Additionally, integration policy aims to build awareness, a sense of belonging, and a responsibility for coexistence and mutually interconnected society among resident foreigners. Insufficient or unsuccessful integration risks creating closed communities of immigrants, social fragmentation, and the emergence of parallel social structures, as well as the growth of xenophobia, intolerance, and extremism (Integrace cizinců 2023). Even though Czechs are often able to recognize and value the work performed by foreigners, they still view migration in general as negative and consider it a burden to Czech society. Leontiyeva and Vávra (2009: 119) have noted that "Czech society has a tolerance deficit."

## 2. Theoretical framework

This research is based on the theoretical paradigm of constructionism. Braun and Clarke claim that constructionism "examines the ways in which realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (2006: 85). Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that psychological and sociological theories are based on definitions of reality. The narratives of intercultural workers in the Czech Republic reveal some basic assumptions relating to the concept of integration in the Czech context.

In the terminological dictionary of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (Terminologický slovník 2016) integration is defined as a gradual process of connecting immigrants with the majority society and introducing them to the host country's functioning and structures. However, when observed from a broader perspective, integration is a complex phenomenon with political, legal, economic, social, cultural, psychological, and religious aspects. In this text, the term integration is understood as a gradual process of the inclusion of immigrants and mutual change, both of immigrants and the majority society, as well as the specifics of the day-to-day interactions between immigrants of first, second and further generations and the host population. Integration is both the facilitation of these interactions and the final "stage" towards which immigrants are guided. It is an active approach towards overcoming reactions such as fear, rejection, distrust, and the exclusion of immigrants and towards creating space for dialogue, inclusion, mutual understanding, and support. For the purpose of this study, an integrated person demonstrates a high level of understanding of the culture and institutional culture of the majority society; similarly, the majority society manifests a thorough understanding of the integrated individual. The specific display of such understandings is the principal issue of this research.

Intercultural workers occupy a unique position, as they constitute a bridge between the two worlds of the minority and the majority societies. In order to facilitate their convergence, they need to recognize the different cultural contexts and the nuanced points in intercultural communication between immigrants and members of the dominant culture. Intercultural competence enables effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation. Matoušek (2013) defines cultural competence as the set of skills necessary to work at the borders of cultures. One is aware of the preferred values, habits, rules of conduct and taboos in different cultures and is able to reflect on the meaning of their actions in different cultural contexts. From this standpoint, culturally competent workers should be able to adapt their communication approach and the definition of objectives to the client's cultural context. Intercultural workers follow the country's integration policy and help it to achieve its goals. At the same time, they are affected by their own experiences of integration and their observations of their clients' lives.

### **3. Methodology**

This research used three methods: face-to-face interviews, observer-as-participant observation, and document analysis. The different data sources

and multiple methods were triangulated in order to increase the reliability and validity of the results (Paul 1996).

Interviews conducted with intercultural workers were the main focus of the research. Observer-as-participant observation provided context for the data derived from the interviews and additional data on the specific incidents referred to in them. Such observation “can identify important problem areas not directly addressed by other methods” (Paul 1996: 137). Research began in February 2020, but it was limited due to the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. Before the COVID outbreak, we observed legal and social counseling for immigrants that was carried out with the assistance of intercultural workers as interpreters. The researcher participated in a total of four counseling sessions and accompanied social and intercultural workers on a day trip to Sapa, which is a neighborhood of small Vietnamese businesses in Prague, the purpose of which was to raise awareness about the counseling offered by Integration Center Prague (ICP).<sup>1</sup> The final method we employed was document analysis. Document analysis is a “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic” (Bowen 2009: 27). In this research we included printed materials (books and brochures) produced by the nonprofit nongovernmental organization InBáze, the NGO’s internal documents, and publicly available documents. Data collected via document analysis served mainly to contextualize the results of the interviews.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with five respondents, four women and one man. These intercultural workers were chosen in the attempt to cover as many different groups and durations of working experience as possible, given that when the research was conducted there were a limited number of intercultural workers employed at the two nonprofit organizations in Prague.<sup>2</sup> All the respondents were employed at ICP, whose clients are third-country nationals who are legal residents in the Czech Republic. Although the small number of research participants may have influenced the results, it is important to note that the five interviews still provided a nuanced understanding of the subject, and common themes and patterns were identified. The respondents had completed a non-formal intercultural training and orientation provided by ICP, as there was no official or accredited training aimed at intercultural competences at that time.

Between 2018 and 2019, ICP had more than 3,600 clients, the majority of whom came from Ukraine, Russia, and Vietnam. The clients most often

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1 <https://icpraha.com/>

2 Integrační centrum Praha – ICP (<https://icpraha.com/>) and InBáze (<https://inbaze.cz/>)

received counseling services related to housing, job searches, obtaining nostrification of diplomas, and accessing social security benefits (Integrační centrum 2019). ICP was selected for the purpose of the research because, at that time, it had the largest team of intercultural workers in Prague and assisted many different minority groups. The respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 30, and their work experiences ranged from 10 months to 8 years. Two intercultural workers worked with Vietnamese clients, two with Russian and Ukrainian clients, and one worked with Chinese clients. Two intercultural workers were Czech, one was a second-generation Vietnamese with Czech and Vietnamese nationality, and two were originally from Russia. The interviews covered three different topics. First, the respondents were asked how they came to be involved in intercultural work and about their background. Second, they were asked for their views on intercultural communication and what they thought were the obstacles to and facilitators of integration. For the purpose of this study, it is important to stress that intercultural communication "involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (Samovar – Porter – McDaniel 2010: 12). Third, there was a more abstract exploration of the respondents' ideas of integration focused on their definitions of integration and perspectives on intercultural work as a facilitator of the integration process.

All the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Czech and analyzed in Czech. A limitation of the sample was that respondents were drawn from only one organization, which may have resulted in the uncovering of a perception of integration within that organization rather than a general perception of integration that is shared by intercultural workers in all organizations. Furthermore, as some respondents noted, ICP has a slightly different approach to other nongovernmental organizations working with migrants, because it is connected to Prague City Hall. ICP tends to rely mainly on counseling, while other nongovernmental organizations lean towards radical social work. Many reported that this tendency may have had an influence on the intercultural work they performed.

The main part of our research was a thematic analysis, which is a method of qualitative analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for systematically identifying, organizing and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. [It] allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (2006: 92). Thematic analysis focuses on commonalities and not idiosyncrasies, i.e., unique elements in the data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) define a theme as a description of something important related to the research question in the sense that it carries value

and meaning and repeatedly appears in a patterned manner within a data item (in this case, an interview) or more importantly, across a data set (across all interviews).

This research focuses on the latent level of meaning, which “goes beyond the semantic content of the data and starts to identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations — and ideologies — that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun – Clarke 2006: 89). Unlike the explicit semantic level of meaning, a latent theme is not just a description, because it necessarily involves interpretation. The focus of the analysis is on the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions that give rise to the respondents’ recorded accounts.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define specific phases of thematic analysis that help structure the process and allow for an “aware” approach. These phases are: familiarizing oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. As the interviews in this research were transcribed, ideas and comments about possible themes were noted in the margins.

While our approach to the data was inductive, the transcription of the recordings took place as we developed our theory. This was done in order to be able to approach the data from different angles and perspectives and with the awareness of the possible socio-cultural contexts that could have been influencing the respondents’ concepts of integration.

#### **4. Language and other obstacles to integration**

The themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews and from participation in the counselling sessions can be summarized as follows: different facets of integration; experiences of intercultural workers; language as a gatekeeper; it is not only language; Czech is not enough; and mental health and psychological barriers.

##### **4a. Different facets of integration**

The respondents identified language fluency, or at least making an effort to learn the language, with integration in all interviews. Knowledge of the Czech language was seen by most respondents as the hallmark of an integrated person, and the success of a person’s integration was judged by how fluent they were in Czech. However, while some respondents considered language skills the most important facet of integration, others questioned whether they should be the primary focus. In general, Czechs are only willing to accept foreigners fully if they speak Czech. The closer



the foreigner's language level is to that of a native speaker, the more easily they are accepted: *“As soon as they meet someone, it's usually someone young, right, who speaks perfect Czech, it is immediately a case of ‘You've become one of us,’ ‘you speak Czech, that's so nice.’ Suddenly it's no problem.”* (Respondent A)

The basic assumption is that effort put into learning the language is equal to integration. This overwhelming focus on language proficiency means that an immigrant, who does not learn Czech or spends years doing so with little progress fails to integrate. This common focus on language is reflected in Czech law, which is inflexible. It envisions a perfect state, in which an universal language is the marker. The ideal of all immigrants being perfectly integrated, i.e., all speaking Czech, is in conflict with the reality. Duemmler (2015) describes the exclusionary effect of establishing language as the dominant paradigm of civic integration. The requirements of integration policies create strong pressure for assimilation, which is in contradiction to the officially stated openness to other cultures that is necessary for the successful integration of society.

In the interviews the respondents described the tension and constant oscillation of the integration process between the ideal and the reality — an oscillation between a static view of integration and integration as an ongoing process.

Respondent D argued that we must include immigrants in Czech society and community from the day they arrive and not wait until they have mastered the language to perfection. Integration is a learning process, which means that it must accept imperfection. Respondent D further emphasized that the majority society should not allow the pursuit of the ideal to obscure the willingness of immigrants to contribute to and connect with Czech society, even if they have not yet learned the language.

*“We have to count on them from the beginning. And we have to inform them, and somehow prepare them, so that from the very beginning they are very responsible and informed, and not wait for them to learn Czech and learn everything for themselves. We would have to wait a long time.”* (Respondent D)

The need to recognize that integration takes time was often mentioned by the respondents and came up repeatedly in all interviews. The issue is not only associated with the time it takes to learn the language but also the time necessary to orient oneself in the system. The degree to which an immigrant is perceived as “integrated” depends on the generation of immigrants to which the individual belongs. First-generation immigrants struggle to learn the language and locate their place in society. For the

second generation, it is sufficient to grow up in the country and attend Czech schools. Once they have acquired a native Czech accent, no one questions whether or not they are integrated. The generational difference in how an immigrant is perceived is stronger with nationalities that find it more difficult to learn Czech.

Because language is the dominant benchmark for evaluating successful integration, integration is more challenging for the first generation of immigrants. Moreover, the concept of an integrated immigrant is more elusive than might be imagined. Regardless of the dimension of language, it largely depends on how society perceives the immigrant. Respondent B argues: *“I think that Czech society has no idea about what it means for a migrant to be integrated.”* If it cannot be made clear what integration requires, it is possible that the goal is unachievable.

Since language acquisition takes time and the process is slow, progress could be hard to discern. An immigrant could be an integrated member of a society without manifesting clear signs. Respondent C describes his idea of integration being accomplished when immigrants feel safe and are full citizens who consider the receiving society their home. This definition goes beyond language and self-sufficiency and reflects the importance of feeling connected to the place of residence and how one is treated by the majority society:

*“The ultimate goal is for our Vietnamese and other foreign clients to feel safe here, to feel that they live in their own house, in their own home, and in their own homeland. That they have that feeling, at least a little, and feel that they are full-fledged citizens like all others.”*  
(Respondent C)

#### **4b. Experiences of intercultural workers**

Our experiences influence our perspective of the world and our assumptions about it. This theme relates to the different areas of experience which have an effect on the perspectives of intercultural workers. They have been influenced by their personal experience of learning languages, their personal experience of integration, and their contacts with immigrants. The importance of developing sensitivity to cultural contexts has also been underlined and supported by their own experiences. The view that the intercultural workers themselves are successful examples of integration was also mentioned in many interviews, but was not considered the gold standard for their effectiveness as intercultural workers.

Those who were immigrants themselves had studied Czech intensively, whereas the Czech intercultural workers had studied languages such as Vietnamese or Chinese as part of their university degree courses. Although the participants reflected again on language learning and its difficulty and complexity, some had experience with volunteering or expressed a desire to help others. This may have contributed to an expectation that immigrants be just as active.

*“I was a person who, I really tried to just study Czech, somehow just fit in, or at least like that, yes, somehow understand it, and at the beginning I thought that all foreigners were the same ... But then I found out when I started working with foreigners myself, I understood that not everyone is trying as hard ... I got into the non-profit sector by chance, working simply in non-profit, and volunteering and then I somehow started working with InBáze. I was just a contact worker, an assistant. And it all fascinated me.”* (Respondent B)

The participants reflected on how much they relied on personal experience, especially at the beginning of their careers as intercultural workers. Their experiences formed the basis of their perspectives on both Czech society and immigrants. Some reflected that this had led them to presume that other immigrants were the same as themselves.

#### 4c. Language as a gatekeeper

There is overwhelming pressure from authorities, institutions, schools, and hospitals that discourages immigrants’ use of translators and interpreters. This arises from a conviction that it would make life too easy for them, and they would therefore have no motivation to learn Czech. Not knowing Czech is perceived as the immigrant’s problem to overcome. Czech language is the default means of communication, and this is not questioned. *“Often, in hospitals, the documents, such as consent to hospitalization or, I don’t know, some consent to the performing of a procedure, are all in Czech, so it’s not very ‘friendly.’”* (Respondent B)

Furthermore, some institutions do not favor long-term cooperation with foreign clients or residents who are assisted by intercultural workers. One of the consequences is that the language barrier remains in place and thus makes routine communication between institutions and foreigners difficult or even impossible. Translation happens as a result of despair on the part of bureaucrats instead of being an integral part of the institution’s work, supporting communication in different languages.

*“After all, those schools need it, there are just so many students with a different mother tongue, where they just use other children to interpret or, I don’t know, a cleaning lady, a janitor from Ukraine or some classmate, and that’s just terribly unprofessional.”* (Respondent A)

Another consequence of maintaining the language barrier is the formation of assumptions about immigrants. For example, Czech schools expect the regular attendance of parents at parent-teacher meetings and for parents to provide the necessary learning materials. Due to language and cultural barriers, however, parents often fail to attend the meetings. Teachers do not understand the behaviour of immigrant parents and often assume that they are just not interested in their children’s performance at school. Parents in turn wonder why their relations with the education institution have worsened. This theme came up in all interviews, which means it affects many nationalities and people with different language abilities.

*“When we met the parents, it turned out that they didn’t understand the letter that the school always sends out about the parent-teacher meeting. It was always written that ‘we would like to see you.’ Even if you speak Czech well but you don’t know the context, ‘We would like to see you’ sounds like you don’t have to come [laughs]. Yeah? And, well, many parents took it in such a way, like, it’s nice to be invited, but if I don’t have to go, I won’t. And they were very surprised that it meant something else, and that the school really expected the parents to go to the meeting.”* (Respondent D)

When translation is available, it is often a relief for both sides. It allows teachers to see that parents are willing to cooperate. Our respondents identified possible solutions that could be helpful for both sides. For the institutions involved, this meant not only being open to translators and interpreters but, more importantly, being willing to produce informational materials in several languages. Such an approach could effectively reduce judgmental attitudes on both sides.

*“What do we want? We want to share the information. Come on, let’s share it so that every person understands it. So let’s just produce leaflets in Vietnamese, let’s do it, for example, I don’t know, in three language versions whenever there’s an announcement to be made.”* (Respondent A)

Such an approach contrasts with the unidimensional view of integration as straightforward language fluency. From this perspective, the language barrier is recognized but is seen as an obstacle to be overcome with the aid of translation, without any sense of shame.

#### **4d. It is not only language**

This theme refers to other obstacles to integration and language learning. In this respect, the financial circumstances of immigrants have an impact, especially for speakers of languages from language groups other than Slavic. In the Czech context, this includes primarily Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants, who need to expend more time and effort to learn even the basics of Czech than, for instance, Russians or Ukrainians. For these groups in particular, factors such as the need to earn a living and take care of one's family often take precedence over language learning.

Having the time to learn a language is a privilege and intercultural workers can see how hard it is for their clients to find sufficient time to study while dealing with family obligations, earning an income, and grappling with everyday life and its challenges. Sometimes people struggle to learn the language and therefore integrate because of an illness, psychological problems or a combination of several different problems. For most immigrants the priority is maintaining residency status and supporting one's family, and frequently also family members who remain abroad.

A great deal of the available assistance for migrants is provided by local non-profit organizations. This is a system that may be completely hidden and unknown to immigrants. Knowing where to turn for help and what information is reliable only comes with experience. Intercultural workers provide outreach to immigrants to point them in the direction of NGOs and reliable sources of information. It is often only due to action by fieldworkers or word of mouth that immigrants find out that such services exist.

#### **4e. When Czech is not enough**

This theme refers to what happens when an immigrant learns Czech well enough to communicate independently and without the aid of translation or guidance. Is it the case that they are then accepted? Respondent B summarizes the issue thus: "*Society has not yet accustomed itself to the fact that the people who have immigrated are not here temporarily. That most of them plan to stay here.*" As the respondents recalled their own experiences, presumptions, and prejudices, they revealed that any difference, be it an accent or

a foreign-sounding name, is widely perceived in the Czech Republic as a sign of otherness and a reason for exclusion.

*“It’s not really enough that you know Czech. Czechs always ask you when they hear the accent. I have a friend who has lived here for, like, 12 years and speaks much better Czech than me and is really great, but when they hear her, they always ask ‘So, where are you from?’ She, as a Czech citizen, who has lived here for twelve or thirteen years. And then they ask, ‘So, when are you going back?’ ‘I live here, I have a family here, I’m not going back.’” (Respondent B)*

In this regard, it is necessary to repeat that Czech society struggles with the idea of how an integrated migrant looks and speaks. The only point of reference is the native speaker of Czech and therefore when the bar is set at native speaker level, the average immigrant has a long way to go to achieve that level of fluency and proficiency in the Czech culture. Moreover, in comparison with a white Czech person, any other accent or skin colour is a symptom of otherness. What seems to be hiding behind the requirement for language proficiency is a demand for total, complete assimilation. Immigrants encounter constant reminders of their otherness.

#### **4f. Mental health and psychological barriers**

Another theme is the support and assistance that intercultural workers provide for overcoming psychological barriers to integration. Clients of intercultural workers know they can rely on their assistance and that they are not alone. However, the role of psychology and the impact of living in a different country on mental health was seldom mentioned by the respondents, and, if so, only indirectly. Ezzedine (2018) observes that migrants often hold back when they come into contact with the host society, as they fear that their ways of expressing emotions may not be accepted by it. She adds that emotions are expressed in a different manner in every culture, and are sometimes not shown at all (Ezzedine 2018: 2). Given that openness to communication about one’s mental health is largely culturally determined, immigrants might not be willing to share their emotions with intercultural workers.

A subtheme connected with mental health is the boundaries of intercultural workers. The respondents frequently mentioned the importance of setting boundaries to protect their mental health and prevent burnout. These are necessary in order to be able to provide good service in a long-

term, sustainable manner. *“It is really important to understand how one should set personal boundaries, how to prevent burnout, and how to work with a client in crisis.”* (Respondent D)

## 5. Research results

The objective of this research was to understand “integration” from the perspective of intercultural workers. The five themes that emerged from our analysis of the interviews we conducted can help answer the following questions.

### 5a. What does “integration” mean to intercultural workers?

The concept of integration is constructed by intercultural workers in a variety of ways. Integration is understood as a broad concept with multiple facets. It is perceived as an ideal to which immigrants should aspire: to be recognized by society as “well-integrated.” This definition reflects a static, normative view of integration that is codified in the law and official integration policy. As Joppke (2007) notes, states must always solve the problem that nationals are born into the system with full rights while immigrants have to earn them.

Whether the emphasis is on language, independence, or self-reliance, it excludes not only those who do not conform but also those who are halfway there. The majority society, as represented by its institutions, does not seem to facilitate the incorporation of immigrants, and thus fails to function as an enabler of integration. Seen in this light, integration is perceived as a normative set of demands from the Czech state and the majority society, rather than an opportunity to enrich both migrants and the host society. Intercultural workers, at least, appreciate integration as a lengthy, continuous learning process that takes years. From this perspective, immigrants who are not fluent in Czech can and should still participate in the life of society, achieve self-sufficiency, and be regarded as integrated.

Different attitudes were identified between workers who are very motivated and who expect a similar level of motivation and perseverance from others with regard to language acquisition and integration in general and workers who recognize the difficulties of integration and structural barriers. Those who are very motivated have higher expectations of their clients, whereas intercultural workers who are second-generation immigrants recognized that speaking fluent Czech is not enough, because even though they themselves have mastered the language, Czech society still struggles to accept them.

An alternative criterion for integration is the willingness to contribute to society, to volunteer, and to connect with others before one can speak Czech, even if one is never proficient. This standpoint seems more inclusive than the dominant discourse on integration, as it recognizes that immigrants can contribute to society in a variety of ways, even if they do not speak fluent Czech. Through empathy and their observation of the lives of immigrants, the respondents see that the struggle to integrate is often related to challenges in other areas of life. Most immigrants are quite willing to integrate. The failure to recognize this willingness is detrimental to their relations with the majority population.

### **5b. What obstacles do intercultural workers encounter as they work to integrate immigrants?**

The obstacles to integration include psychological, language, social, cultural, and structural barriers. Immigrants struggle to navigate the confusing labyrinth of Czech bureaucracy due to their limited ability to communicate in Czech. Some tend to rely on translators and interpreters to ensure that communication runs smoothly and that they have psychological support during their encounters with officials, teachers, doctors, etc. Others strive to do everything themselves and confront psychological barriers on the part of officials who are only used to dealing with other Czechs. The combined difficulty of the language barrier and the cultural barrier is often impossible for immigrants to overcome without the aid of an interpreter or an intercultural worker who is positioned to bridge the different cultural norms and clear up misunderstandings.

Public institutions often reject long-term cooperation with intercultural workers because their employees see them as the immigrants' advocates. This again reflects the expectation that immigrants should conform and not make any demands. However, as Berry (1997: 11) remarks, integration also requires that "the dominant group must be prepared to adapt national institutions (e.g. education, health, labor) to better meet the needs of all groups". Thus if the state truly aspires to integration, adapting its national institutions is a necessary step. Nevertheless, not all institutions take the same approach. Intercultural workers are often called upon to mediate conflict arising from a language or cultural barrier, which is especially true of educational institutions.

Moreover, what impedes further incorporation of intercultural workers into the system of social support and integration is the current lack of knowledge about the profession. At present, not many people know about intercultural work in the Czech Republic. Many immigrants and institutions



are not aware of the existence of the profession, which makes it even more challenging to explain to institutions the role intercultural workers play. As they are not only translators, they are seen as advocates of immigrants and thus are unwelcome in some offices.

### **5c. What practices constructively support the process of integration?**

From the perspective of immigrants, as understood by intercultural workers, taking an active interest in the host country is helpful, along with learning the language and being open to establishing contacts with members of the majority society. It is important to stress, however, that these traits are highly dependent on the circumstances in which immigrants find themselves, where they have come from, how great the cultural barriers are, and how open to change and flexible they are. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that immigrants are often expected to conform to the majority culture, rather than being welcomed to participate in a process of mutual change.

*“Don’t push Czech everywhere,”* sighed Respondent A in the course of an interview. A greater openness of institutions to making instruction and orientation materials available in foreign languages and normalizing translation as appropriate assistance in communication were seen as highly desirable by respondents. Furthermore, intercultural workers emphasized that they play an important role in the integration process. They believe they are well-equipped to assist immigrants in orientating themselves within the system and in increasing their capacity to navigate it independently. They added that the presence of intercultural workers prevents the spread of misinformation, the use of unauthorized intermediary services, and ultimately, social exclusion.

### **5d. How do intercultural workers assist in intercultural contact?**

Intercultural workers have a unique position in that they can both assist migrants and establish long-term trusted cooperation with state institutions. They help overcome cultural barriers on both sides and explain traditions and other cultural and social practices. Additionally, they share resources with their clients about the availability of other services corresponding to the clients’ needs, including social and legal counseling, debt counseling, psychological therapy, and social groups for migrants in community centers. The finding that the willingness of immigrants to take an active interest in the host country and learn the language is highly dependent on their circumstances suggests that the current discourse on integration constructs

integration as a matter of individual effort, rather than a process that involves society as a whole.

In relation to institutions, intercultural workers can mediate contacts with minorities and use their experiences with migrants to make the institutions more accessible. They can also provide direct feedback on the success of integration policies.

The respondents see overcoming the language barrier as very beneficial for the integration of immigrants, because it helps them deal with everyday situations independently. The requirement for language proficiency is still a matter of expectations, and whether the majority of society should have the same set of expectations for all immigrant groups is another matter. Language difficulties complicate communication and lead to false assumptions and misunderstandings on both sides. In general, Czech society tends to demand assimilation rather than welcome diversity. In this respect, Gabal (2004) suggests that successful integration requires a balance of naturalizing immigrants, promoting respect for other cultures, and fostering social cohesion within a society founded on openness. The research also raises the question of whether the majority society should have uniform expectations for all immigrant groups, given the varying language-related challenges faced by different communities.

## **6. Conclusion: Integration as shared responsibility**

The value of intercultural work derives from its focus on the role of culture in everyday interactions and on deciphering multiple meanings in intercultural communication. Intercultural workers also provide psychological support to immigrants, who find reassurance in their assistance. In the Czech Republic, culturally-biased attitudes in the education system, among health insurance providers, and in the social system in general have an impact on relations between immigrants and officials. The two sides often have conflicting expectations. According to the research outputs, the Czech authorities often expect to deal with a fully acculturated immigrant with a high degree of fluency in the official language, while immigrants very often do not correspond to this profile. Integration is thus perceived both by the institutions and intercultural workers more as a one-way process, with the active agent being the person to be integrated. The integration workers reflect this preoccupation unconsciously in their own approach to immigrants.

The research also found that intercultural workers' understanding of integration is influenced by the dominant discourse on integration in Czech society. It revealed that integration is predominantly viewed by intercul-

tural workers from two perspectives: language and self-sufficiency. Most of the respondents stressed knowledge of Czech as the key to successful integration. This risks overlooking the structural barriers that immigrants face, such as discrimination and inaccessible institutions. Immigrants have a better chance of mastering the Czech language if they have a good financial situation, knowledge of another Slavic language, or simply a natural interest in language learning. There will always be people who find it very difficult to learn a new language for a variety of reasons. As Navrátil (2013: 228) notes, because immigrants are entering a new environment, support is required not only to ensure that their practical needs are met, but also because the social roles of immigrants change over time.

Being self-reliant and well-versed in dealing with the social system is indeed crucial to an immigrant's integration into the majority society. However, not even all Czech citizens born and raised in the country can be considered self-reliant at all stages of their lives. Immigrants who are not fully proficient in the language can still play an active role in Czech society with the aid of intercultural workers, translators, and interpreters. There are many measures of successful integration, of which language proficiency is just one. Moreover, satisfying official requirements for residence does not guarantee that an immigrant will be accepted in society. The present research could be expanded by interviewing immigrants regarding their perceptions of intercultural workers and the factors that aid or hinder them in the integration process. Examining the presumptions of the institutional staff who work with immigrants would also provide insight into how they perceive integration.

The discussion on integration is a debate about individual solutions to societal problems. In the Czech Republic, the responsibility is firmly placed on the shoulders of immigrants, and they are expected to demonstrate that they are worthy of their new home country. The obstacles they face, such as inaccessible institutions, poverty, and mental health struggles, are common to many people in the rest of the society. Difficulty in communicating with and having access to governmental institutions are also obstacles for many native Czechs, even though the reasons may be different (e.g. formal bureaucratic language, inaccessible buildings for people with disabilities, or confusing systems). This raises the question of how much the individuals are able to do and what responsibilities institutions have to provide access for all in society, regardless of their level of self-sufficiency.

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