

# SOCIAL INTEGRATION: STRATEGIES TO FOSTER MIGRANTS' EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN A GROUP

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## ABSTRACT

Asian migrants can sometimes find it difficult to demonstrate their knowledge and contribute to workplace meetings and class discussion in an individualistic host country, where locals often appear to be direct, outspoken, and eager to talk over other people. Migrant workers and students may become frustrated and discouraged when they cannot find the gap to break into a lively discussion. Developing the social competency of effective participation in a group discussion can enhance migrants' social integration and personal wellbeing.

This paper describes and explains how the cultural mapping approach, a schematic framework initially developed for the EXCELL™ (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) Program for fostering international students' sociocultural competencies (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998), can be adapted to facilitating Asian migrants' participation in a group meeting in Western settings. The paper provides practical examples of how cultural mapping can help break down complex social interactions into more manageable phases, to help migrants to join in a group discussion. The application and utility of cultural mapping as a stand alone tool or part of a more comprehensive sociocultural competency or host language training program are discussed.

**Workshop Activity:** Workshop participants will be invited to participate in a cultural mapping activity on effective participation in a group. Participants will be asked to reflect on their own observations in the challenges that Asian migrants face in participating in a group, and the potential use of the EXCELL™ cultural mapping method for enhancing migrants' social integration and promoting their health and wellbeing.

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## INTRODUCTION

Asian migrant workers and students have become a visible presence in New Zealand and Australian workplace and educational settings. Owing to a change in emphasis in skilled migration policy since the mid-1980s, both countries have seen a dramatic increase of middle-class Asian migrants seeking entry into workplaces, attempting to advance careers, and striving to establish businesses (Fletcher, 1999; Ho, 2002; Mak, 2001).

Many skilled Asian migrants have returned to universities to study for local qualifications or to change to a field of studies with better perceived career prospects and lesser English language requirements, as an initial career development strategy (Mak, 2001). Large numbers of Asian-born children who migrated with their parents have also reached the age for attending university, many of whom are motivated by family values in academic achievement and are often encouraged by their middle-class parents to excel in their chosen field of professional training (Mak & Chan, 1995).

Yet research has shown that many Asian migrants have encountered language and especially cultural barriers in transferring their skills to mainstream workplaces. Ironically, their lack of local work experience further confers a substantial disadvantage in job search (e.g., Fletcher, 1999; Mak, 2001). Negative stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes towards Asian newcomers in the community also pose a cause for concern (Ip, Kawakami, & Duivenvoorden, & Tye, 1994).

### **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTICIPATION IN GROUPS**

Community observations have suggested that even among Asian migrants highly proficient in English, cultural differences could hinder migrants' effective participation in groups at work or educational settings, contributing to perceived and real issues in social integration. Migrant workers and students may be highly technically competent and have prepared well for meetings and classes, but still find it challenging to break into formal and informal group meetings because of their linguistic style and differences between communication rules in their culture of origin and the host culture. According to Tannen (1995), linguistic style is a set of culturally learned signals by which we not only communicate what we mean, but also how we evaluate others, their meaning, and their abilities. Turn taking in a conversation is one element of linguistic style.

In discussing the group dynamics of international project-based team activities in higher education, Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, and Rastogi (2005) have cited Hofstede's (1991, 2001) research on cultural dimensions impacting on work-related values and behaviours, highlighting that cultural differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance are particularly problematic for effective group performance. Power distance, defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98), is typically much higher in individualistic Western societies (such as Australia and New Zealand) than in Asian (e.g., Chinese and Japanese) societies. Asian cultures are relatively collectivistic, where people value group-centeredness and interdependence above individual rights and autonomy, personal identity, and independence, the latter being a constellation of individualistic values that are important to cultures with Anglo-European roots (Hofstede, 1991).

As Paulus et al (2005) put it, in a low power distance culture, individuals generally believe that the inequalities between levels of the hierarchy should be minimised, that supervisors should be more consultative of subordinates, and that the ideal leader believes power resides in the people. Participating effectively in project teams and other groups may be particularly challenging for students or workers with high power distance orientations, especially where decision-making and conflict resolutions within the groups are involved (Hofstede, 1991, 2001).

Uncertainty avoidance, defined as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 113), is a value commonly held among some Asian cultures (e.g., Japan and South Korea), where people

prefer to follow precedents and rules that fit the norm. This contrasts with the relative comfort with which people from cultures characterised by low uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Australia, Great Britain, The Netherlands) tolerate uncertainty. According to Mead (1998), individuals from low uncertainty cultures are less likely to feel anxious and less emotionally resistant to change, and more able to take risks.

In group situations, Asian migrants from cultural backgrounds that emphasise high power distance and uncertainty avoidance may be surprised and irritated when other members appear to speak out of turn, express views different to established practices, boast about individual achievements, advocate changes that have apparently not been thought through, and generally not showing respect to people more senior in the organisational hierarchy.

Many Asian migrants who come from a cultural background that traditionally respects the positional power of the leader, falsely assume that in Western cultures the leader will indicate who can speak and when in a group meeting. There is anecdotal evidence that migrants may feel left out in groups and annoyed by locals who often appear to be direct, outspoken, and eager to talk over other people. Migrant workers and students may become frustrated and discouraged when they cannot find the gap to break into a lively discussion, and worry that their apparent reticence may jeopardise opportunities for academic success and career advancement.

Worse still, migrants' difficulty in joining in the group discussion may be misunderstood as lack of interest or competence by host group members. Such an interpretation may reinforce stereotypes of Asians as being passive and reserved, and are counter-productive to effective intergroup communication and intercultural relations (Gudykunst, 1994; Pettigrew, 1998). Recent research in the social psychology of language and cross-cultural psychology has found changes in identity and language behaviour occurring as a result of the contact between people from different ethnolinguistic groups (Noels, Giles, & LePoire, 2003; Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996).

### **EXCELL™ CULTURAL MAPPING FOR EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN A GROUP**

An innovative approach for learning new cultural rules for effective participation in a group is using the EXCELL™ Cultural Mapping method, which was first described in Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (1998) as an integral part of the EXCELL™ (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) Program initially offered to international students in Canada, Australia, and the UK. Ideally co-facilitated by a leader from the host culture and another leader originally from a culturally different background, the group program has since been introduced to The Netherlands and New Zealand. It has also been used with migrant students and workers originally from various Asian countries or other non-English-speaking backgrounds, as well as mixed groups of locals and ethnic minority members.

Appendix A provides additional information on the EXCELL™ Program, including suitable participants, trainer requirements, the learning process, and group procedures incorporating the cultural mapping method.

This paper will outline the EXCELL™ cultural mapping method and process, and how it may be applied to facilitate migrants' effective participation in a group for employment and education purposes, to enhance their social integration and wellbeing. According to our recent experiences with an innovative implementation of the EXCELL™ Program with migrant jobseekers in a job placement program (offered by Bridgeworks Personnel in Brisbane), migrants may find themselves in a range of challenging scenarios involving participation in team and other workplace and community-based meetings. For example, some migrant

jobseekers were exasperated that they could not find a way to contribute to lunch room conversations between colleagues, or interject in a weekly cross-functional team meeting in headquarters. The migrants expressed their fears that colleagues would perceive them as people who had nothing to contribute, were overly shy or worse yet, snobs. While migrants were often clear about what they wanted to say, they simply did not know how to break into the conversations.

### **WHAT IS CULTURAL MAPPING?**

Just as newcomers to a city need a road map to travel, conduct their business, and enjoy being part of the community, newcomers to a culture need a cultural map or schema with specific guidelines about how to navigate verbal and non-verbal communication in particular social contexts in the new cultural and social territory (Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000b). This way, newcomers are more likely to experience success and social integration, and avoid costly mistakes that can impact on their confidence and wellbeing. People who grow up in a culture simply “know” how to “get around” (i.e., implicit social rules), but this knowledge is seldom written down and taught explicitly to new arrivals.

EXCELL™ cultural mapping makes explicit the unwritten social rules for commonly occurring sociocultural competencies. For Asian migrants in Western settings, a particularly challenging sociocultural competency pertains to participation in a group. A cultural map is a clear, succinct description of effective and appropriate ways of behaving (both nonverbal and verbal) in a specific social context (e.g., contributing to an interdisciplinary team meeting). Cultural maps can also include the social values and historical reasons underlying why these behaviours are preferred in the local culture.

The EXCELL™ Trainer’s Manual (Westwood et al., 2000b) explains how facilitators can engage group members to develop a cultural map for participating effectively in a team meeting in the workplace. Facilitators ask group members what have they observed host nationals do when they participate actively in a group. Group members are encouraged to discuss their observations and comment on the extent to which these behaviours differ from what is considered to be appropriate behaviour in a similar situation in their home culture. Facilitators explain that there are many different ways of enacting the target behaviours, depending on the specific situation. Together with the facilitators, group members develop a cultural map comprising behavioural responses (presented as sequential steps) that people in the local culture would generally consider appropriate or acceptable in a workplace team meeting.

Behaviours in a cultural map are described as observable units that can be reproduced by the observer. These responses will include non-verbal behaviours such as tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions, and hand and body gestures useful for indicating interest and engagement in the team meeting, readiness to speak up, agreeing or disagreeing with views expressed, being open to alternative views, or inviting others’ responses. As well, the map will include suggested words and phrases that could be used to interject and then contribute to the discussion. An alternate approach used by EXCELL™ facilitators is to adapt a generic cultural map to the needs of individual group members.

The EXCELL™ ABCD Model provides a practical framework for appropriate behavioural and verbal responses for managing the **A**pproach/Attending, **B**ridging (or Breaking in), **C**ommenting/Communicating, or **D**eveloping/Departing phases of social interactions (Westwood et al., 2000b). The ABCD Model represents a schematic, user-friendly approach to breaking down apparently complex social interactions (e.g., turn taking in a group discussion). A template used when developing a cultural map for this scenario includes the

specification of the scenario (e.g., type of workplace meeting), any preparations required prior to the group meeting (e.g., background research on the topic for discussion), and each of the ABCD phases.

Values (such as directness, logical reasoning, respect for others' contributions, and relative informality) underlying critical behaviours in each of the ABCD phases can be incorporated into the cultural map. Participants are often pleasantly surprised to note that the same value, such as respect, may be expressed in rather different behaviours in their original (e.g., Asian) and adopted countries (e.g., immigrant nations such as New Zealand).

Below is a written example of what a cultural map based on the ABCD format and incorporating underlying values may look like. A video of this vignette featuring a migrant in Australia needing to participate in a group discussion at work will be shown in the workshop.

Example of an EXCELL™ Cultural Map for Participation in an Informal Staff Meeting

**Scenario:** Staff room discussion about planning a farewell function for a colleague (named Sandy in the vignette)

**Goal:** To interject and express a personal opinion about the party

Preparation: Think through options about type of party and type of present that could be appropriate before coming to the staff meeting.

**Approach**

Non-verbal behaviours: Make eye contact with the person who is speaking. This will indicate that you want to speak. Use a short sweeping open hand gesture as you start to speak to attract the attention of other group members

**Breaking in**

Say: "I have an idea about what we should do to farewell Sandy". Or "I've been thinking about what would be a great gift for Sandy".

Non-verbal behaviours: Smile, open hand gesture, lean forward in chair when starting to speak then move back into the chair; clear, strong voice that can be heard easily by all group members

(Value: Indicate that you appreciate Sandy as a member of your work group.)

**Commenting**

Say: "I think it's important that we find out exactly when Sandy plans to leave" Or "Let's talk about the sort of gift that Sandy would really appreciate"

Non-verbal behaviours: Smile, use an animated/lively tone of voice.

(Value: You respect Sandy's plans and what she wants.)

**Developing**

Say: "What do you think of that idea? Or "I'm interested in other people's ideas"

Non-verbal behaviours: Smile, lean back in chair.

(Value: show respect and interest in other group members' opinions)

## DISCUSSION

Asian migrant newcomers, along with other recent migrants, are often hard working and eager to contribute to their adopted countries' productivity and economic prosperity. However, coming from a culturally and linguistically different background (such as the case for migrants born and raised in different parts of Asia) may pose issues in fully participating in groups, which can impact on the migrants' successful settlement in mainstream workplace, education, and community settings.

In this paper, we offer the EXCELL™ cultural mapping method as a tool for increasing Asian and other migrants' cultural awareness of the different social rules governing effective participation in a group in their adopted countries. People coming from an Asian or other collectivistic cultural backgrounds can benefit from a better understanding that relative to their original cultures, generally speaking, Western cultures are characterised by lower power distance, and greater individualism and tolerance of uncertainty. A cultural map for participation in a group in the host culture represents one socially appropriate way to break into a group discussion that is likely to facilitate the newcomers' social integration, at least in a particular social context.

Cultural maps are not fail proof and are not prescriptions that must be followed rigidly. In the initial stages, however, facilitators must select specific identifiable behaviours in order to reduce confusion (Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000a). Alternative support strategies (e.g., using different phrases to break into the conversation after an unsuccessful first attempt) written into the cultural map are often useful.

The emphasis on cultural observations in the mapping process encourages participants to practise observations of how host members behave in various group situations in everyday interactions. This can enhance participants' capacity to identify verbal and non-verbal triggers of participating in different types of groups (e.g., formal and informal, small and large, same gender and mixed gender, as a supervisor and as a subordinate). Being part of a training group confers additional benefits. Listening to other participants' experiences and observations is often affirming. The emotional and practical social support generated in a learning community can alleviate acculturative stress and enhance recent migrants' wellbeing.

The cultural mapping approach is fundamental to the EXCELL™ Program for intercultural skills training. The feedback we have obtained from having provided EXCELL™ Trainer Courses to hundreds of skilled group facilitators, suggests that cultural mapping can be an effective stand alone strategy in developing Asian-born and other non-English-speaking background people's cultural awareness of the social processes and micro skills in joining in a group discussion in English-speaking countries. Some international students and migrants have indeed found cultural mapping to be a particularly useful component of the EXCELL™ Program. Many other participants have indicated in their program evaluations that they have further consolidated their learning from cultural mapping through the subsequent behavioural practice stages of the EXCELL™ training, a process that we would recommend where time permits.

Increased settlement assistance and intervention to overcome barriers to employment and foster social integration are important for an optimal utilisation of imported talents among business and skilled migrants (Mak, 2001), and for attracting and retaining them amidst keen international competition for highly skilled labour (Fletcher, 1999; Ho, 2002). The cultural mapping approach for effective participation in mainstream groups represents a useful strategy for intercultural education and early intervention. It can be offered as a stand alone

training module, an integral part of a comprehensive intercultural social skills program such as EXCELL™, or complement an advanced or professional English language program.

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## **Appendix A: Information on the EXCELL™ Program**

### **EXCELL™ in a Nutshell**

EXCELL™ is an experiential and practice-focussed social learning program aiming to develop people's intercultural social competence and facilitate intercultural relations without compromising minority members' original cultural identity (Mak & Barker, 2004). Key sociocultural competencies taught in the Program include culture access (e.g., participation in a group, seeking help) and culture negotiation competencies (e.g., refusing a request, giving feedback). The full program is offered over four to six weekly sessions of two to three hours duration. EXCELL™'s conceptual framework is described by its developers in Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, and Barker (1999). Summaries of the program's application and efficacy of its use in multicultural educational environments are documented in Mak (2000), Ho, Holmes, and Cooper (2004), and Mak and Buckingham (in press).

### **Suitable Participants**

EXCELL™ is designed to be offered, ideally by two trainers (co-facilitators), to groups of between 8 and 20 participants, all or many of them:

- being students, immigrants, refugees, or expatriates from diverse cultural backgrounds;
- who have been in the new country long enough to have dealt with their initial "survival" needs, and are now seeking ways of engaging with the new culture;
- who have enough fluency in the host language to participate in a group program, and
- who are motivated to improve their intercultural social competencies for attaining academic, professional, and personal goals.

### **Trainer Requirements**

EXCELL™ trainers who deliver the program must have successfully completed a three-day EXCELL™ Trainer Course. The intensive course is suitable for counsellors, and academic and international office staff members who work with immigrants, expatriates, or international

students, or other "transition" or special needs students, or locals who want to increase their cross-cultural awareness and/or their social effectiveness. Candidates for the trainer course will have group facilitation skills and have experience in the field of cross-cultural service delivery. At the time of writing this article, delegates from over 60 educational institutions have completed the trainer course in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands.

### **Theoretical Basis for the EXCELL™ Learning Process**

EXCELL™ focuses on behavioural competence training derived from the following established learning paradigms (Mak, Westwood, et al., 1999).

1. Operant conditioning: Early attempts are shaped towards the desired behaviours by rewarding successful trials.
2. Classical conditioning: Social anxiety is reduced by pairing successful performance of the behaviours in a non-threatening environment.
3. Social cognitive learning: Participants watch credible models perform desired behaviours, and develop social-efficacy beliefs that they too can take specific actions to bring about a positive social environment;
4. Role-based group learning: Participants observe others' behaviours and perfect skills in a supportive environment with like people.

### **Group Procedures Incorporating Cultural Mapping**

Below is a summary of the group procedures in teaching each sociocultural competency (Westwood et al., 2000).

1. Alliance building and assessment: The trainers create an environment in which the unique cultural backgrounds of participants are acknowledged and validated, making it safe to share personal experiences with challenging intercultural social encounters (e.g., in having to interrupt to participate in a group discussion, or in putting a request to an authority figure).
2. Cultural mapping: Explanations of what behaviours will be appropriate in certain types of social encounters and why things tend to be done the way they are.
3. Modelling of a practice scenario to replicate the social situation by the trainer then follows, with the participants observing the interaction and commenting on it.
4. Participants are then invited to practise the same exchange in pairs with a third person as an observer, with the trainer coaching and giving feedback and mini-demonstrations of how to change the approach if required. This process is repeated if necessary until participants master specific micro-skills.
5. Goal-setting and contracting to apply learning in a real situation. Participants are helped to create realistic and specific action plans, and write them down as a homework activity in the relevant section in their individual copies of the EXCELL™ Participant's Manual. Participants are encouraged to report back to the group the outcomes of their actions in the following session.

### **Further Information about EXCELL™**

For further information and training opportunities about the full Trainer Course (3 days) or the Cultural Mapping Trainer Course (2 days), visit [www.excellinterculturalskillsprogram.com](http://www.excellinterculturalskillsprogram.com) or contact the authors. We have offered EXCELL™ Trainer Courses in New Zealand at Christchurch College of Education in 2003, and Victoria University of Wellington in 2005 and 2006.