The socialisation processes of ‘Asian-bringing employees’ in the New Zealand banking industry

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Abstract

Socialisation processes are often viewed from a white male and/or North American point of view, and most socialisation researchers do not conduct research with people who speak English as an additional language (Anakewe & Greenhaus, 1999; Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Louis, 1980; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Wanous, 1992). This research then focuses on minority groups, ‘Asian-bringing employees’ in the banking industry of New Zealand. For the purpose of this research, the term ‘Asian-bringing employees’ is used to capture the special nature of Asian immigrant employees.

In this paper, we were concerned with strategies that two New Zealand banks adopted to socialise their Asian-bringing employees into their organisational culture. At the same time, we were keen to explore the experiences and perceptions of Asian-bringing employees in relation to the socialisation processes. This paper reveals ways in which the banks expected their Asian-bringing employees to adopt the banks’ own historically ‘white’ cultural ways of being and practice, and/or promote an understanding and acceptance of Asian culture and traditions.
Introduction

There has been a major change of demographics in New Zealand since the country first opened its door to migrants in the mid-19th century (Bedford, 2003). Early migrants to New Zealand were almost all from the United Kingdom (Kember, 2002); however, since the end of the 20th century, the migrant pattern has changed, with an increasing number of migrants coming from Asian countries such as China, India, Japan and Korea (Statistics NZ, 2007). This has largely been due to government initiatives which endeavour to strengthen ties with Asia. The New Zealand Government has intentionally tried to attract skilled Asian migrants to boost the labour market in New Zealand (Young, 2007). This has had an impact on the New Zealand banking industry. As a response to their promotional strategies to try and attract Asian customers, the local banks started to actively seek to employ a diverse workforce of mostly Asian-bringing employees.

In this study, Asian-bringing employees is a new term developed from this research. It is not the first time that a new term has been coined by researchers. For example, Rigney (1999, cited in Smith, 2005) names the methodology of indigenous research as “indigenist” (p.88). This term has been replaced by an indigenous term “Kaupapa Maori” (Bishop, 2005, p.110; Smith, 2005, p.90) in New Zealand to theorise the approach to Maori language. The reason why we did not apply the term ‘Asian-immigrants’ was that it seemed to be associated with a group of people who were ‘outsiders’ to the New Zealand culture in contrast to the ‘insiders’ of the dominant culture. Asian-bringing employees captures the nature of the employment situation, and highlights the active roles Asian immigrant employees take in weaving their Asian culture with the dominant culture in the banks. So how these employees can be socialised into the organisational culture has then become a challenge for the New Zealand banks.

This paper adopts Pullen and Linstead’s (2005) identity model, Cheney’s (1983) identification strategies, and Jablin and Putnam’s (2001) model of organisational socialisation to analyse the socialisation processes of two New Zealand banks – Bank A and Bank B. The paper particularly focuses on the attitudes and reactions of Asian-bringing employees towards the socialisation processes in order to explore the power relationships between the banks and this group of employees. The final
outcomes of the paper will hopefully benefit the banks and their employees as well as other local organisations, migrants and the future research on the discipline of organisational socialisation.

Background
The dictionary’s definition states that all inhabitants of Asian continents are called ‘Asians’. However, the term in practice is applied “almost exclusively to the peoples of East, Southeast, and South Asia as opposed to those of Southwest Asia… who are more usually designated ‘Middle’ or ‘Near Easterners’” (“TheFreeDictionary”, n.d.). Many academic researchers (Carraher, Franklin, Parnell & Sullivan, 2006; Hastings, 2007; Yeo, 2006) use ‘Asians’ to refer to Chinese, Japanese, Singaporean, Korean and Indian, and compare ‘Asian’ culture to ‘Western’ culture.

The first Asian immigration to New Zealand can be traced back to the 19th century, when immigrants where largely from Britain and Europe, with Chinese making up a smaller percentage (Kember, 2002). The number of Asian migrants stayed low until later changes in immigrant policy and the government’s attitude towards Asia (Kember, 2002). Since the year 2000, a large group of Asian migrants (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Korean) have received temporary work permits, work visas, or were granted residence or New Zealand citizenship (Statistics NZ, 2007). This has restructured the migration pattern where formerly New Zealand only accepted immigrants from Europe.

With a growing number of migrants from Asia, there has been considerable expression of anti-Asian sentiment in New Zealand in recent years. For example, the New Zealand First Party electioneered on an anti-immigration policy which aimed to arouse the sentiment of ‘ordinary Kiwis’ to attack the current government immigration policy (Marsh, 2002). The New Zealand media, meanwhile, continued to print and broadcast negative news about Asian migrants, such as cheating on passports, job offers and driving licences (Waikato Weekly, 2005). With the increase of anti-Asian sentiment in New Zealand, Asian migrants found it hard to obtain employment with local organisations. And many tertiary-trained Asian workers often end up in menial jobs, which are different from their previous work experience and expectations (Munshi, 2005; Waikato Weekly, 2005).
In contrast to those organisations which are not willing to recruit staff from ethnic minority groups, Bank A and Bank B have adopted positive discrimination policies in relation to employing workers who speak English as an additional language. Bank A and Bank B established and have good reputations in the New Zealand banking industry. Realising the potential market in Asian migrant groups, both banks have set up Asian and/or migrant divisions and kept recruiting Asian staff. Their multi-lingual team is experienced at looking after the needs of Asian migrants and students. Therefore, we selected these two local banks as the research case studies.

**Literature review**

Organisational socialisation focuses on how individuals learn the beliefs, values, behaviours, skills and so on necessary to fulfil their new roles and function effectively within an organisational context (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Building on this focus, many researchers have investigated this individual-organisational relationship and identified organisational socialisation as a process through which newcomers become organisational members (Anakwe & Greenhaus, 1999; Bullis, 1993; Jablin & Putnam, 2001; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Wanous, 1992).

Organisational socialisation tactics can be grouped in two ways: “institutionalised socialisation (formal/collective, sequential, fixed, serial)” and “individualised socialisation (informal, individual, nonsequential, variable, disjunctive)” (Jablin & Putnam, 2001, p.763). The first group reflects a more structured programme of socialisation, whereas the latter tactics reflect a relative absence of structure. Barge and Schlueter (2004) support this view and argue that institutionalised socialisation promotes “attachment to a job and organisation”, while individualised socialisation promotes “role innovation and superior performance” (p.235).

Jablin and Putnam’s (2001) socialisation model is a good example that illustrates organisational socialisation as a long-term process rather than a short-term tactic. The model divides organisational socialisation into three stages: “an anticipatory socialisation phase”, “an entry or ‘encounter stage”, and “a long-term period of ‘metamorphosis’ stage” (Jablin & Putnam, 2001, p.758). At the encounter stage, a newcomer experiences orienting, training, mentoring, and information seeking and
giving in order to learn to be labelled as ‘normal’ insiders (Jablin & Putnam, 2001). At the ‘metamorphosis’ stage, an employee experiences role conflicts, role negotiation and resocialisation. Leader-follower relationship takes a critical role in this stage (Jablin & Putnam, 2001).

Pullen and Linstead’s (2005) identity model is another good template for analysing the organisational socialisation processes and the identification strategies used by the organisation. This model provides a broader framework with which to investigate the individual and organisational identity and identification processes. “Identity capital, modes of subjective identity formation, and identity performance and event” are the three elements of the model (Pullen & Linstead, 2005, p.4). The identity capital relates to the cultural, experiences, gender, race, etc that an individual has and brings with them to the organisational context, while the identity formation examines the ways in which the employee and organisation are shaped and particularly focuses on the strategies used to encourage employee identification with organisational goals. There are five features of the identity formation process. These are modes of incorporation, disciplined subjectivity, subjective identity, resistance, and autonomy (Pullen & Linstead, 2005). These modes deal with the issues of values, membership, self-identity in wider social discourses, opposition and empowerment (Pullen & Linstead, 2005). The key feature of the model is that it investigates the wider social context, the individual, organisational discourses and also the performance of these identities.

In addition, Cheney’s (1983) work uncovered four identification strategies and techniques typically used in organisational communication to encourage employees’ commitment and membership. The first strategy “common ground technique” consists of four factors – “expression of concern for individual”, “recognition of individual contribution”, “advocacy of organisational benefits and activities” and “testimonials by employees” (Cheney, 1983, pp. 150-151). Basically this strategy looks at what support, awards, benefits and promotion are received by employees and how they think/talk about organisations. The other strategies are “identification through antithesis”, “the assumed ‘we’”, and “organisational symbols” focus on uniqueness, team orientation, and symbolic communication of organisations (Cheney, 1983, pp.150-151).
The literature on socialisation has focused and constructed the issue from white-male/American point of view (Anakewe & Greenhaus, 1999; Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Louis, 1980; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Wanous, 1992). Few researchers, with Bullis (1993) being a notable exception, have examined socialisation in relation to gender and even fewer have involved people who speak English as an additional language. Therefore, in this paper, intercultural communication is taken into account. Contrary to many Western cultures, for example, that value the individual and autonomy, cultures of many Asian countries such as China value family, collective, status and hierarchy (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Hofstede, 1991; O’Keefe & O’Keefe, 1997). Asians, therefore, tend to be more passive, polite and uncritical in communication in the eyes of many Western people (O’Keefe & O’Keefe, 1997).

It is perhaps surprising how little attention has been given to these factors when as early as 1988 Musgrave identified power issues as one of the key issues in analysing socialisation. Musgrave (1988) emphasises the power relationships in the socialisation process; analysing those with some power, and those being socialised, whether unconsciously or because they hope to become members of some group. In a diverse organisational culture such as the focus of this study for example, those who dominate will exert more power to shape the minority. Yet researchers have ignored this crucial aspect when researching organisational socialisation. Given the role of power in socialisation, research needs to attend to effects of the power-balance between the organisation and employees, old employees and newcomers, as well as majority groups and minority groups.

**Methodology and methods**

Social constructionism has been used by many communication scholars to provide a framework to analyse the organisational context (Allen, 2005; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002; Harre, 1986; Jablin, 1982, 1987; Miller, 2000; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Influenced by the positions of interpretivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, social constructionism rejects the idea that there is an absolute truth in the world, and favours the idea that reality is subjective and can be interpreted differently (Lincoln &
Guba, 2000; Miller, 2000). This paradigm moves its emphasis from the person to the social realm.

Of significance for organisational communication, how organisational members behave, think and feel is dependent on how they perceive and construct their identities in everyday practices (Allen, 2005), as well as with whom they are communicating and how they are socialising with others in organisations. In that sense, social constructionism suggests that we need to consider historical, social and cultural contexts in order to understand their impact on individuals’ experience.

Under the paradigm of social constructionism, we use the strategy of case studies (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005) to examine the socialisation processes of Asian-bringing employees in two banks. We designed this research as a comparative case study to compare and contrast the strategies used at Bank A and Bank B to socialise their employees, as well as to compare and contrast attitudes and reactions of Asian-bringing employees towards the banks’ socialisation processes.

Purposeful random sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was adopted to determine the participant sample for this research. There were 24 interviewees in total who voluntarily participated in the study. The criteria for selecting the participants were based on the focus of this research which was on the socialisation processes in the banking industry. Asian-bringing employees of the two case study banks then became the main pool of participants. There were 19 Asian-bringing employees from both banks who participated in this study. They were originally from the mainland of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Korea, and Malaysia.

The participants included different ethnicities and also had differing genders, length of employment and positions held in the banks. For example, we proposed to invite some employees who had been working for less than one year, and also invite others who had been with the banks for a long time. By doing so, we would get to understand how the banks socialise old employees as well as newcomers. Moreover, we attempted to see how the banks assimilated English-as-first-language employees into their culture, as a comparison with how they did to Asian-bringing employees. Thus, English-as-first-language workers of two banks were also labelled as suitable
participants. Five New Zealanders (Pākeha) from both banks, in the end, voluntarily participated in this research.

The interviews lasted for half an hour to one hour and were conducted at a location selected by the participant. We used a standardised open-ended interview structure (Patton, 2002). The questions and the structure of the questions were varied slightly for clarification in some instances and to accommodate the flow of the interview conversation with the different participants. Most interviews except three (in respect of the participants’ requests) were recorded. All the interviews were transcribed, with Mandarin recordings being translated into English. We used critical thematic analysis to identify the recurrent or repetitive words, phrases, or ideas and then to categorise the key themes (Charmaz, 1995; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Patton, 2002) from the participants’ responses.

As with all research, this project could only focus on a certain number of the banks’ branches, documents and employees. The participants were mostly Asian-bringing employees. This meant that the research was limited in terms of the breadth of the generalisation that could be made from the research. The other limitation occurred in the process of interview transcribing. Most Asian participants had Chinese ethnicity, the same as one of our researchers. As a result, many of them felt more comfortable speaking Mandarin during the interviews. It required this researcher to translate the Mandarin scripts to English after transcribing the interviews. This might mean that the English translation might not fully represent the meanings. Despite this limitation, the participants found it easier to honestly articulate their experiences in their own language. To clearly and fully show the responses from those participants, we put both Mandarin scripts and English translations quoted from their interviews in this paper.

Results and discussion
The results showed that Bank A and Bank B had done well in encouraging Asian bringing employees’ identification with the use of different socialisation and identification strategies to assimilate them into their two different types of organisational culture. The results also highlighted that both banks attempted to treat
employees similarly, and assimilated Asian-bringing employees to the culture using Westernised ways and the same ways as they did for other employees.

**Competitiveness vs fairness**

Bank A and Bank B used identification and socialisation strategies to socialise Asian-bringing employees into their organisational culture. The employees had experienced training, mentoring, information seeking and giving, role negotiation, relationship development with peers and leaders, and social gatherings (Jablin & Putnam, 2001) in the banks. Cheney (1983)’s identification strategies were also adopted. While Bank A leaned to use the strategies of “recognition of individual contribution” and “advocacy of organisational benefits and activities”, Bank B used the strategies of “expression of concern for individual” and “testimonials by employees” (Cheney, 1983). In other words, Bank A offered more benefits and promotion opportunities to the employees. Bank B, however, was keen to provide support for the employees, care about the balance between their public and private life, and encourage the employees to stay longer with the bank.

For example, one participant from Bank A told us that the regional manager used to ask his/her branch to select “three outstanding performers who got (cheques with) thousands (of) bucks” (Interviewee 3), but it was confidential. S/he also informed that they had team referrals, that is, the winning team would win a prize of $500. Additionally, they had a website where good customer service would be nominated, and the nominees could get a $50 voucher. Besides offering benefits to the employees, the bank provided plenty of opportunities to promote employees. Except one, participants all had the experience of being promoted:

如果你要的话，机会就在那边，就看你怎么去争取把握。
(Interviewee 9, Mandarin script)

If you want, the opportunity is right there. Just see how you can take it.
(Interviewee 9, English translation)
The participants from Bank B, for example, said that they received lots of support from the managers. The bank did not have many sales targets to complete because the concern was more about the balance between the employee’s family life and work. As one participant said:

基本上 5 点钟它就希望你回家了…譬如像我有 young family 的，老板会说你 5 点钟，5 点半，为什么不回家？

(Interviewee L, Mandarin script)

Usually when it is 5 o’clock it expects you to go home… like me who has young family. The boss would say ‘it’s 5 o’clock or 5.30, why haven’t you go home?’

(Interviewee L, English translation)

With such support and care from the managers, the employees at Bank B were willing to work for the bank for a long time, which was the issue covered in Cheney’s (1983) strategy “testimonial by employees”. Most participants had been working for Bank B for more than four years. One participant had been working there for more than 11 years.

Further, both banks used institutionalised socialisation (Jablin & Putnam, 2001) such as Christmas functions, team buildings, branch trips, success functions to promote the employees’ “attachments to a job and organisation” (Barge & Schlueter, 2004, p.235). They also encouraged individualised socialisation (Jablin & Putnam, 2001) such as drinks and coffee after work, potluck, farewell parties, and birthday celebrations to facilitate the employees’ relationships. However, we found that Bank A focused on competitions in its social functions, whereas Bank B organised social functions to let people relax from work and meet those they did not often meet at work. The banks used these socialisation strategies to accommodate the employees’ values with organisational values (Pullen & Linstead, 2005).

Bank A valued competitive culture, whereas Bank B valued fair culture. According to the participants, Bank A was more sales-focused, while Bank B was more people-focused. These two banks could be seen as two different types of ‘families’. The
metaphor for Bank A was like a 21st-century family. The managers were like the parents who encouraged kids to have independent thoughts and catch the opportunities in their life. The employees were like the children who played and competed with each other. Compared with the family style of Bank A, the one of Bank B was more traditional. The managers were like the parents who really cared about their employees, who were like their children. The parents tried to share love equally to the kids and let the kids feel they were the ones they could depend on.

**Strong Membership**

Most participants in these two banks positively identified themselves with the banks. They showed strong membership and played the roles required by organisational systems (Pullen & Linstead, 2005). One participant used “a hunting (animal)” to describe his/her role in the bank:

> 所以像 hunting…就是寻找业绩业务的那种，寻找更多的客户 potential. 
> (Interviewee 7, Mandarin script)

> So it is like a hunting… [animal] which is always looking for more achievements, business, and more potential of the customers. 
> (Interviewee 7, English translation)

Other participants used ‘lion’, ‘tiger’ and ‘leopard’ to depict Bank A. With male-oriented features, these three animals were all aggressive, competitive, strong, energetic and good at running fast and for a long time, which were the values the participants attributed to the animals. The comments made by these participants addressed the issue of how individuals aligned themselves with organisational goals, visions and values (Pullen & Linstead, 2005). Their understandings of organisational identity matched with the expectations the bank had of them.

In Bank B, some participants used the term ‘dog’ since they were loyal to the bank and customers. ‘Tutor-lecturer relationship’ was also used to describe the employees’
close relationships with the bank. One participant used special metaphors to express his/her strong membership with the bank:

如果他是一批马的话，我可能是它身上的什么东西吧，可能是它的马鞍可能是毛，因为我总是跟着银行走嘛。
(Interviewee L, Mandarin script)
If it is a horse then I would be something on the back of it. It may be its saddle or hair because I am always with the bank.
(Interviewee L, English translation)

“Mode of disciplined subjectivity” (p.6) of Pullen and Linstead’s model can be applied to what the participant said here. That is, the participant fit him/herself into the role(s) required by Bank B. Since the participant positively identified with the bank, s/he showed a supportive attitude towards it.

**Power and Resistance**

Asian-bringing employees from the two banks had different attitudes and reactions towards the banks’ socialisation processes. They even saw their identities differently within the banks. The bank’s culture of competitiveness had a big impact on Asian-bringing employees at Bank A. According to Pullen and Linstead (2005), one of the processes of subjective identity formation is “by which individuals position, or see themselves positioned, within/identify with wider social discourses” (p.6). We found most Asian-bringing employees positioned themselves as Westernised individuals although their ethnic identities were Asian. For example, interviewee 4 from Bank A said that s/he got used to speaking English when communicating with other employees. Even in private with employees having the same ethnic identity, s/he found it easy to speak English as well. Another participant expressed that s/he did not like another bank because:

所以的员工在里面都是亚洲人嘛，都是中国人。我比较喜欢有 kiwi 文化，而且跟 kiwi 共事多一点会比较简单一点。
(Interviewee 5, Mandarin script)
All the employees down there are from Asia, I mean all are Chinese. However, I pretty like kiwi culture. It is much simpler to work with kiwi workers.

(Interviewee 5, English translation)

This was different from what was found by O’Keefe and O’Keefe (1997), that Asian workers, in particular Chinese, tended to be passive and uncritically accepted information when working with Western workers. Chinese and other Asian-bringing employees at Bank A tended to be direct to the point.

Not only did they enjoy the Westernised working relationships, the participants also said that they loved the competitive culture involved in the Western-styled social functions such as playing mini-golf, carting, having an ‘Amazing Race’ team building, attending quiz night at a Casino, or having a drink at a club. Having these Westernised social functions was the strategy used by Bank A to assimilate its employees. Assimilation is a process used to bring employees to the organisational culture, help them cope with the surprise and uncertainty, and assign new roles to the employees (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Jablin & Putnam, 2001). The responses of Asian-bringing employees showed that such strategies were successful at encouraging their identification and assimilating them into “organizational social systems/discursive structures” (Pullen & Linstead, 2005, p.6).

In contrast to Asian-bringing employees who accepted their Westernised identities at Bank A, those at Bank B appeared to have stronger ethnic identities and they held different attitudes and reactions towards the bank’s socialisation processes. The participants explained their preferences for social functions were different from the ones organised by the bank. For example, playing golf and indoor rock climbing were not welcomed by those Asian-bringing employees because they had never played in their home countries, nor felt interested in trying them. “I’m not a social person” was often heard in the interviews with the participants.

One participant even expressed his/her disappointment at the Kiwi-styled socialisation functions:
我非常不愿意去参加他们的聚会啊，中国人出去谁说会各拿各钱，但是也会，但是没意思，大伙儿在一块儿我自己点东西吃，然后自己买酒喝，然后就走了...太大了，我们不理解。我去了两次我再也不去了，我吃饱了撑的，我自己花钱，不爱喝不爱吃的，很难受的，还不如几个朋友之间一块儿聊聊天。

(Interviewee B, Mandarin script)
I don’t like to attend their social gatherings at all. Have you seen Chinese people pay separately when dining out? Sometimes we would but it was not fun. I order my meal when gathering with others, buy my own drink, and leave... a big difference. We don’t understand. I don’t want to attend any more after having been there twice. Why I have to tolerate it that I pay for the one that I don’t like to drink and eat. It is unhappy. It would be better to have a chat with several close friends.

(Interviewee B, English translation)

The participant used the Mandarin term “吃饱了撑的” describing his unwillingness to ‘tolerate’ the Western social function at club. It justified that the bank had more power over this Asian-bringing employee in deciding on the type of social activity. The bank tried to assimilate employees to the organisational culture without considering their different cultural backgrounds and values. It made the employee felt like an ‘outsider’ or ‘stranger’ and feel “uncomfortable, embarrassed, fearful and/or unwilling to engage in such communication” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, p.19).

Therefore, this participant used ‘their’ to represent Kiwis’ and ‘we’ to represent Chinese people, which created a boundary between the in-group and out-group. This is an example showing how the participant resisted “being colonized by discourses of which they do not approve or in which they do not believe” (Pullen & Linstead, 2005, p.6), and how s/he tried to have power and autonomy through maintaining his/her own identities (Pullen & Linstead, 2005) in the bank.
Conclusion

In conclusion, Bank A and Bank B intended to socialise Asian-bringing employees into their different types of organisational culture through identification and socialisation strategies. The employees in both banks showed strong membership and alignment with the banks. However, in contrast to the argument made by Jablin and Putnam (2001) that employees could impact on the organisation in the assimilation stage, most Asian-bringing employees in the banks merely took passive roles. They clearly assimilated to the organisational culture and learned to be ‘normal’ insiders (Jablin & Putnam, 2001). However, it seemed that the banks used very Westernised ways and the same ways of socialisation processes to assimilate these Asian-bringing employees to the culture without considering their different ethnicities, values and perceptions. So some of the Asian-bringing employees decided to position themselves as Westernised individuals whereas others worked hard to keep their own culture and values, and resisted being colonised by ‘white’ cultural discourses of being and practice.

The banks need to listen to different voices and draw on Asian-bringing employees’ cultural knowledge and experience in the socialisation processes. In return, the employees will feel valued and will be more willing to bring in their knowledge and experience to the banks’ culture. We believe this study will also provide useful information for other local organisations which have a desire to employ a diverse workforce. Future research needs to focus on the impacts of culture, gender or age on the perceptions of organisational socialisation.

References


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