



‘They Actually do Get More Money’: Using Myths in Justifying Hierarchies in Ethnic Relations

SANNA RYYNÄNEN

EMMA NORTIO

SIRKKU VARJONEN

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses myths as a societal and discursive mechanism for maintaining and reproducing hierarchical ethnic relations. Theoretically, we rely on Paulo Freire and discursive social psychology (DSP) in conceptualising myths as false perceptions that act as counterforces to a critically informed understanding of reality and end up discursively reproducing the societal status quo with its unequal power relations. The data was produced as part of an artistic-scientific process between 2017 and 2019, which consisted of migration-themed events relying on participatory theatre. The events took place mainly in suburban bars but also in libraries and nursing homes around Finland. In our analysis, we identify three myths regarding ethnic relations: a myth of immigrants as profoundly different from majority Finns, a myth that discrimination or racism is a minor problem, and a myth of privileged immigrants. We also exemplify how myths are employed, co-constructed and actively used in producing versions of reality and for opposing equality measures and the politics of anti-racism. We argue that conceptualising a certain type of account as myth and combining Freirean theorisations with DSP to analyse them, adds to understanding of the ways in which social hierarchies and power relations are constructed, maintained and reproduced.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Sanna Ryyönen

University of Eastern
Finland, FI

sanna.ryynanen@uef.fi

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Societal questions relating to migration and ethnic relations are surrounded by countless misconceptions or straightforwardly erroneous narratives that circulate as common facts. Such narratives are often called myths, both in scientific research and in everyday accounts (e.g. Hirschfeld 2012; The Guardian 2014). They often invite little or no reflection, as they strongly appeal to common sense, especially when narrating something that coincides with one's worldview. As anthropologist Lawrence A. Hirschfeld (2012) stated in his analysis on race and the young child, myths and 'folk theories' are, owing to their easily transmitted narrative quality, 'so readily grasped that believers are little impelled to seek supporting evidence, much less the opinions of supporting expertise' (p. 17–18). But how and why are such myths employed?

We became interested in myths as a perspective on migration, and specifically ethnic relations, when working as researcher members in a multiprofessional collective consisting of social scientists and performance-art professionals. The *Puhekupa [Speech Bubble]* collective organised a series of migration-themed events combining participatory theatre and social scientific research in places such as suburban bars and libraries across Finland, which aimed to create a setting propitious for joint conversation on the potentially volatile themes of migration, exclusion and racism. Our attention was caught by the unflinching conviction with which some of the participants introduced clearly incorrect 'facts' about migration and ethnic relations into the conversation – at times surprisingly similar to those we had previously encountered in social media, even down to the smallest detail. We also noted that it was not necessarily possible to contest the truthfulness of these accounts with 'our' facts that we, as researchers, derived from previous research and official statistics. In this article, we employ the concept of myth to examine the ways in which the white majority Finnish participants used 'false facts' to make sense of migration, ethnic relations and intercultural encounters.

The aim of the article is to analyse myths as a societal and discursive mechanism for maintaining and reproducing hierarchical ethnic relations. In our analysis, we identify myths occurring in discussions of migration and ethnic relations, and examine how these myths are used in everyday interactions and society at large using the discussions in the *Puhekupa* events as our research material. Our research method has taken inspiration from arts-based social research (Leavy 2015; Ryynänen, Nortio & Varjonen 2021) and our data consists of transcripts from nine events, complemented with field notes from all 24 events and collective autoethnography regarding the whole *Puhekupa* process.

Our multidisciplinary approach has been informed by social pedagogy, social psychology and discursive approaches. As our starting point in defining the concept of myth, we have utilised the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) conception of myths as false perceptions that act as counterforces to a critically informed understanding of reality and end up reproducing the societal status quo together with its unequal power relations (Freire 2014). This critically informed approach represents a specific understanding of myths as opposed to the definitions that take into account all types of collective representations, both beneficial and harmful, that carry messages of 'values, beliefs, aspirations, goals, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes' (Bouchard 2017: 23). The Freirean understanding of myths has directed our attention specifically to the power hierarchies inscribed in them, for instance, in the form of discrimination and racism. Accordingly, we argue

that myth is a useful conceptual and analytical tool for analysing and revealing the functioning of discursively reproduced power hierarchies and oppressive structures in society.

It has been stated that myths have been ‘insufficiently studied by the social sciences in recent decades’ (Bouchard 2017: 5), but such research does exist to some extent (e.g. Balinisteanu 2014; Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead 2008; Hirschfeld 2012) – although at times the concept of myth is used in parallel with the concept of stereotype in such a way that its specific meaning is ultimately left undefined (Ayers 2013). The Freirean approach to myth brings a novel contribution to the existing literature on social myths and their functions, as our literature review suggests that it has not previously been applied to empirical social research. The Freirean approach directs attention to the power relations embedded in myths which, in the case of the myths presented in our article, favour the Finnish white majority. Freire himself emphasised that it is not meaningful to repeat or imitate his thinking, but rather to constantly reinvent it in new social situations and conditions (Gadotti 2001). This is what we aim to do by combining the Freirean approach to myth with a discursive approach in order to recognise the ways in which social inequality is legitimised and (re)produced by the use of language, and to suggest how such understanding can contribute to the struggle against discrimination in the Nordics and beyond. We argue that a struggle against the negative consequences of myths necessitates learning to recognise myths that circulate in our society, to understand the nature of often ideological myth-making, and to unveil the mechanisms by which myths function in everyday interactions. In Freirean terms, we wish to contribute to processes of conscientization (Freire 1980, 2014). Accordingly, the article has both theoretical and practical objectives. It aims to contribute to the social scientific discussion of myths, specifically in the field of ethnic relations and racism by suggesting a novel approach to these, and to encourage application of a myth-conscious approach in various practical work settings.

MYTHS AS A SOCIAL MECHANISM

In social scientific research, it is possible to identify at least three theoretical strands to approaching myths. Firstly, myths’ sacredness or moral-spiritual dimension is taken as the most distinguishing feature that separates them from other types of collective representations (Bouchard 2017; Ponizovkina 2017). This definition coincides with an established understanding of the concept as a ‘traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events’ (Knowles 2006) or as a vessel of sacred values that transcend the division between primitive and modern (Bouchard 2017). Understood in this way, myth is a ‘vehicle of meanings, values, and ideals shaped in a given social and historical environment’ (Bouchard 2017: 25), governed more by emotion than by reason. According to this definition, myths as such are neither beneficial nor harmful. Secondly, myths have been approached as empowering discursive processes that have the capacity to mobilise social energies against established authority (Sorel 2004, cited in Balinisteanu 2014) and that permit the ‘outcasts (...) access to aesthetic expression outside dominant discourses’ (Balinisteanu 2014: 109).

Third, there is a body of critical research and literature that has theorised myths specifically from the perspective of their manipulating, alienating, and thus intrinsically harmful nature as the vessels of (intentionally) false information, for instance about

minorities and other societal groups that are discriminated against. Understood in such a way, myths come to be defined specifically as ‘stubbornly inaccurate visions’ that narrate misconceptions (Hirschfeld 2012: 17) or as entire discursive constructions relating to the oppressive structures of power and authority in society (Freire 2014). As such, myths are not only oversimplified images, as in the case of stereotypes, but something more emotionally appealing and engaging that persuades people to see certain discursive constructions as unquestionable facts. They carry a strong (narrative) appeal that escapes reflexivity and rational arguments. This understanding of the concept is rooted in the idea of a certain intentionality implanted in the processes of myth-making with the aim of maintaining the societal hierarchies of power (e.g. Freire 2014). Moreover, it calls for the necessity of dismantling such power hierarchies by shedding light on myths and their mechanisms.

Our approach is rooted in this third perspective, which makes our understanding of the concept of myth a normative one. We have taken inspiration from the method for researching social reality that Paulo Freire formulated for his pedagogical approach, known as Pedagogy of the Oppressed or Liberation Pedagogy. Freire stated that in order to critically understand a given reality, it is necessary to delve into the ways in which people experience, interpret and conceptualise such reality. It also requires a spatial-temporal understanding of the historical, political, social and cultural circumstances, that is, an analysis of the context where ‘subjective’ experiences and interpretations are rooted and that nourish them. For Freire, these two ‘layers’ of reality, which he called ‘subjective’ and ‘objective,’ do not exist separately but in a dialectic interplay, affecting one another. It is worth noting that despite the concepts Freire himself chose to use, the ‘objective’ factors are not to be understood as objective in the sense of being neutral facts or existing independently of people’s actions. To delve into such factors means an attempt to achieve a critically informed understanding of the social context that is as comprehensive as possible and that goes beyond immediate, common-sense observations. For Freire, this is not only a task for research and other expert fields of society, but a call for a critically reflexive life orientation for each and every one (Freire 1980, 2008, 2014).

The analytical framework that Freire (2014) constructed for the critically reflexive understanding of reality also takes into account ‘hindering factors’ that he conceptualised as myths. Freire’s definition of myths is essentially linked to his key concept of conscientization: that is, the process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action, as well as of the oppressor–oppressed dialectic. The oppressors want, according to Freire, to destroy in the oppressed their quality as ‘considerers’ of the world, and since it is not possible to completely achieve this, they mythicise the world by developing a ‘series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed entity’ (Freire 2014: 39). Accordingly, for Freire, myths expressly involve the perspective of oppressors for the purpose of maintaining and recreating oppressive structures in society: ‘(s)ubmerged in reality, the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the “order” which serves the interest of the oppressors whose image they have internalized’ (Freire 2014: 62). Thus, myths, when understood in the Freirean way, have a specific societal function to maintain the status quo that benefits the oppressors by justifying and legitimising their power over the oppressed. Examples of these types of myths include the myth of the ignorance of the people and the myth that the oppressive order is a ‘free society’ (Freire 2014). In sum, this kind of conceptualisation of myths sees them as a societal mechanism of false perceptions and defensive rationalisations that prevent

critical reflection and act as counterforces to a critically informed – or ‘objective’ – understanding of reality (Freire 1980, 2008, 2014).

We complement the Freirean conceptualisation of myths with discursive social-psychological approaches. In line with discursive psychology, our analysis consists of a detailed examination of interaction that approaches talk as situated social action through which descriptions of social reality are constructed (Edwards & Potter 1992). The present analysis also draws from critical discursive psychology (e.g. Edley 2001; Wetherell 1998) in the sense that we consider, in line with Freire, interaction as rooted in its wider social context. This approach, which we henceforth call discursive social psychology (DSP), thus gives us tools to explore the fine details of everyday interaction while seeing it as embedded in macro-level, culturally and historically formed meaning-making processes. A similar approach to studying inequalities has been proposed by Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2019). They argue that the combination of critical discursive (in their case, feminist Foucauldian) and Freirean approaches is especially useful in contexts where inequalities are hidden or downplayed and when the aim is to critically examine and diversify knowledge concerning power relations. In our analysis, including the wider social context means, for instance, recognising that contemporary myths (as discursive social constructions that are used in everyday accounts as often unquestionable facts) are, in many cases, rooted in ‘fake news’ and other similar structures of false or misleading information that justifies prevailing inequalities. They circulate in social and other media, and are possibly purposely implanted in discussions to manipulate public behaviour (McCloskey 2022). This calls for further analysis of who the oppressors are in such a setting.

In sum, our theoretical framework on myths, which has drawn inspiration both from Freire and DSP, aims to tackle the two perspectives on myths that we argue are essential in understanding the complex universe of social myths. First, the Freirean conception of myths directs attention to the existence of myths as ‘hindering factors’ to a critical reflection of the social reality around us that has certain roles and functions in society. Second, DSP approaches myths as shared discursive constructions and helps us understand the ways in which myths are used in everyday interactions and how they function in a specific situation and beyond.

METHOD AND DATA

The data in this article was produced as part of a research-oriented artistic-scientific process that ran between 2017 and 2019 and consisted of 24 *Puhekupla* events, mainly in suburban bars but also in libraries and nursing homes around Finland. The objective of the events was to open up, with the help of a theatrical approach, a setting propitious for joint conversation on the potentially volatile themes of migration, exclusion and racism. The events consisted of six performative scenes and a joint discussion moderated by one of the researchers of the collective. The discussion was based on the thoughts and feelings the scenes evoked, and the events were constructed in the form of a ‘pub quiz’: the participants were asked to fill in a ‘quiz form’ that consisted of simple questions relating to the scenes with no right or wrong answers. Moreover, the participants were invited to intervene in the scenes, either verbally or in the form of acting, with the aim of resolving the problematic situation that had been presented. We opened the events by emphasising that respectful exchange of ideas, but no unanimity, is expected. The participatory theatre and the ‘pub quiz’ format were to bring elements of playfulness to the events, which indeed

seemed to make it easier to approach the complex theme. The approach consisting of performative scenes that welcomed participation and invited critical reflection was inspired by Augusto Boal's (2000) forum theatre approach. The 'pub quiz' format was our own invention.

The scenes, or vignettes, consisted of examples of situations where somebody, intentionally or unintentionally, had ended up acting in discriminatory or racist ways or had witnessed such behaviour. The scenes were intended as an invitation to reflect specifically on the actions of majority members. This perspective was chosen as all the members of the collective represented the Finnish white majority, as did the vast majority of event participants. The vignettes were loosely based on the real-life experiences of either the members of the collective or those reported in research literature. (For similar research approaches, see e.g. Enria 2016).

In order to attract a variety of participants, we chose different types of locations across Finland. Most of the events took place in suburban bars and nursing homes for the elderly, and a few in public libraries. Owing to the informality of the events – the participants were able to come and go – we did not gather any demographic data. Based on our observation notes, the participants in suburban bars were mostly middle-aged blue-collar workers and represented the Finnish white majority, whereas the participants in the nursing homes were socio-economically more varied and, naturally, considerably older. The discussions in nursing homes and libraries tended to have a more polite undertone, whereas the events in suburban bars sparked more straightforward commentaries. Occasionally, the comments were also openly discriminatory or racist. As organisers of the events, we chose to challenge and contest these by voicing our personal views and referring to research findings. In the rare cases of blatant hate speech, we firmly stated that speaking like that is not tolerated at these events. Overall, our role as researchers was closer to co-participant/co-discussant than more traditional question-posing researchers, but the participants were aware of our status as academic researchers. In some events, the participants openly inquired about our 'agenda' and suspected that the events acted on the cause of some (left-wing) political party or other such institution. When this happened, we stated that we represent the *Puhekupla* project and that we have no political or other kinds of allegiances nor any hidden agendas. We also repeated the aim of the events, reminding the participants that no conformity or conversion of views is expected from anyone.

From a research perspective, the *Puhekupla* process could be labelled flipped research (Suoranta & Ryynänen 2014; see also Shaw 2012) as it was not initially designed specifically as a research process. In the first instance, the events were designed as a social act that aimed to bring people together amongst societal polarisation. It was only after the first event that we started to recognise them as a potential site for social scientific research. The process bore resemblance to memory-work (Haug 2019) and other similar research approaches with no predefined research questions. While we developed our research ideas and questions along the way, the idea of myths first came to us much later, when we were going through the data. At that point, we started paying attention to a certain kind of argumentative logic that seemed to call for further analysis and theoretical framing.

As soon as we decided to include the research component in the process, from the second event onwards, we made sure that all participants were informed that the events were part of a research process and that whenever we recorded the discussions,

we had everyone's informed consent. We also informed the participants about strict anonymity and confidentiality in using the data. As the discussions did not concern any personal matters and participation was voluntary, we did not find the setting problematic in such a way that it would have violated ethical standards. However, as one of the event settings was suburban bars, with some of the participants at times somewhat intoxicated, we took specific care in moderating the events, making sure to protect the dignity, integrity, right to self-determination, privacy, and confidentiality of personal information of all participants (Declaration of Helsinki, [World Medical Association 2013](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.281053), <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.281053>). Separate ethics approval was not obtained.

Out of the 24 *Puhekupla* events, we recorded nine with the consent of all participants. The recorded events represent the overall character of the events, and the recordings consist of all three types of locations. The decision not to record all events was guided by practical factors. In some places, the participants were spread out in such a way that recording would not have been possible without constantly moving with the recording devices and thus disrupting the course of the event. The main data in this article consists of the transcripts of the nine recorded events (274 pages, Arial, 12 pt, line space 1), complemented by our ethnographic observations and fieldnotes of all the events. The production of the data was based on artistic intervention, and accordingly, our research bears resemblance to participatory art-based social scientific research ([Leavy 2015](#); [Ryynänen et al. 2021](#)), with participatory theatre in a supporting role in producing data to 'generate meaning and trigger responses from the audience [whom we refer to as participants]' ([Wang et al. 2017: 16](#)).

Our analysis proceeded in two phases. The first phase started by clarifying the concept of myth for the purposes of our analysis. We defined myths as accounts relating to migration, migrants, ethnic background, discrimination, prejudices and/or racism that can (1) be argued to be incorrect or untrue and (2) be assumed to undermine efforts for equality between majority Finns and ethnic minority group members in Finland. Using these criteria, we then identified myths in our data. In this phase, each of the three researchers first worked independently and then brought their findings to be tested collectively. Finally, we grouped the various myth-accounts under three main categories.

The second part of the analysis drew on DSP (e.g. [Edley 2001](#); [Wetherell 1998](#)). In this phase, we paid close attention to how the participants employed, used and reconstructed/co-constructed these myths in their talk during the *Puhekupla* events. This analysis involved examining the functioning of the myth-talk primarily in the local context of the *Puhekupla* events. In practice, we examined the rhetorical and discursive devices used in warranting claims, looking, for instance, at how myths were constructed as factual and the functions of myth-construction and use – that is, what purposes may be served by resorting to a specific migration-related myth.

We approach the data as every day or lay discourse, in contrast to elite, political or media discourses (cf., e.g. [Augoustinos & Goodman 2017](#)). We acknowledge that even though our aim was to make the discussions as informal as possible, the context in which the data was generated differs in many ways from everyday situations. However, in line with [Wetherell \(2003\)](#), we argue that similar cultural resources can be drawn upon in different settings ranging from coffee table discussions with friends to formal research interviews, rendering the immediate interactional setting less significant than the ways in which participants orient towards the discussion.

In the following section, we first introduce the three types of myths we identified in the data and describe their key characteristics. This provides the background for the second section of the results, concerning the use and functions of the myths in the interaction. The results are presented through selected extracts from the data. We have aimed to keep the translations as literal as possible while making slight modifications to make them readable.

THREE MYTHS REGARDING ETHNIC RELATIONS

In our analysis, we identified and named three recurring myths in our data: (1) *a myth of immigrants as profoundly different from majority Finns*; (2) *a myth of discrimination and racism as minor problems* and (3) *a myth of privileged immigrants*. Each one was employed in various ways: sometimes a myth was simply referred to as an objective truth, 'the way things are'; other times it was offered as one of potentially several competing points of view, which the speaker themselves may or may not commit to. The latter type of occurrence included occasions where the participant spotlighted the existence of a widely circulating conception and explicitly referred to it as wrong or inaccurate, or resigned from it by claiming it to be absurd or unethical. Even though the myths identified in the data were not new as such, we felt identifying them was a necessary step in analysing their occurrences, which is the main focus of our analysis.

MYTH OF IMMIGRANTS AS PROFOUNDLY DIFFERENT FROM MAJORITY FINNS

The myth of immigrants as profoundly different from the majority Finns presents society as divided into two groups: us and them. It essentialises stereotypical factors attached to certain minority groups, which may or may not have some historical or cultural foundation, into personality traits, as if they were unquestionably shared by all members of the given minority group. It is employed to justify differing expectations and prejudice towards immigrants. The following extract gives an example of talk in which the myth of profound differences was treated as factual and the difference between immigrants and Finns was presented as being based on culture:

Yes, there [it] is, here the cultural difference really comes, like, many pluses to them, it's probably, it's due to the culture that they treat the elderly differently there. But they probably, I dunno, does it only concern the elderly, they do probably treat each other in such a way as well. (Event 3, Nov 2018)

The speaker commented on a scene in which the recruitment of a nurse of Congolese background was discussed among three of her colleagues, all representing the white Finnish majority. In the scene, the characters justified the recruitment of this person by referring to the culture of care the new nurse represented because of their Congolese background and claimed that it must make them a suitable candidate for the job. In the extract, the speaker aligned with the characters of the scene and oriented towards the scene, not as an invitation to critically reflect on behaviour based on cultural stereotypes, as the organisers had intended, but as a conversation based on an objective representation of the nature of Congolese or African culture.

Presenting immigrants as natural carers owing to their culture is a widely shared conception in Finnish society. Previous research has shown that it operates to gender

and racialised students with immigrant status (Kurki 2019; Kurki, Brunila & Lahelma 2019). Also, care-work professionals with a migrant background have been found to problematise the identity position of ‘migrant care worker’ (Olakivi 2013). The extract shows that by referring to immigrants as natural carers the speaker is able to present seemingly benevolent views on immigrants (*‘many pluses to them’*) while distancing them from majority Finns, thus constructing immigrants as cultural others (Kimanen et al. 2022).

There were also several occasions in our data when it was discussed how immigrants (as an abstract homogenous group rather than as heterogeneous individuals from different backgrounds) are profoundly different from Finns on the basis that ‘they’ do not abide by the rules – or, more often, that they are presented as such. In the following example, the speaker is commenting on a vignette in which the character is on her balcony, complaining to herself about a car that is parked in the wrong way. She first blames her neighbour, who has a foreign name, and grumbles about immigrants never abiding by the rules. After it turns out that the car belongs to her white-majority Finnish neighbour, her tone completely changes, and the irritation caused by the car vanishes. In commenting on the scene, the speaker identifies the existence of the myth of profound differences and takes a critical stance towards it:

Here it sort of shows everywhere, the prejudice that the immigrants don’t follow the rules, the common rules. That it’s like, when it’s not known who parked it [the car], so that the guilty party is found, so that it’s related to [the fact] that it’s someone [who is] different who does not follow and [those who are] similar follow the rules and know the rules. So that kind of prejudice works there in the background that immigrants don’t follow the rules. (Event 2, Nov 2018)

In previous literature, the kind of talk that presents differences between social groups as natural and inevitable was discussed as essentialist argumentation (Verkuyten 2003). While the myth of profound differences was widely recognised by the participants, they rarely aligned with it. On the contrary, they typically criticised it or presented it as a view generally held by others.

MYTH THAT DISCRIMINATION OR RACISM IS A MINOR PROBLEM

The second myth we identified in our data presents discrimination and racism as small-scale challenges rather than major societal problems. The myth comes up in two types of descriptions. The first version consists of accounts where discrimination is referred to as being widely exaggerated in the media:

At some point, I started to be completely fed up with those people who kept talking about all the different ways in which immigrants are being discriminated against, and how every single case someone had seen somewhere, in which somebody is misbehaving, had to be discussed endlessly in some paper. I mean that created an idea that it is normal behaviour, whereas in reality I live here in [name of the suburb in which the Puhekupla event was held] and there are a lot of immigrants here, and over there I see the kids playing nicely in the yard of the daycare centre and at the mall, lighter and darker skinned boys move around and they seem to have a fairly good time together. So the world is not such a place

where some [person of a] different colour pokes their nose in and instantly gets bullied. I mean, the majority of people behave just in a smart and normal way. Of course, one bad case is a bad case and it hurts, but it would be worth keeping in mind that it was, after all, about only a certain person and there are a lot of other people too. (Event 6, Feb 2019)

The speaker seems to suggest that discrimination against immigrants in Finland is, to a large extent, only a false image painted by the media, which is far from the reality that people with different ethnic backgrounds live their lives in harmonious coexistence and the occurrence of discrimination is only a rare exception. Extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986), such as *all those ways, every single case* and *endlessly*, are used when describing how discrimination is discussed in public, thus portraying the preoccupation with discrimination as common, unreasonable and even ridiculous. This argument about the true nature of affairs is supported with phrases such as ‘in real life’ and ‘I can see ...’, which work to construct the speaker as a reliable witness with first-hand evidence of the topic discussed.

The second version of the myth of discrimination and racism as a minor problem involved questioning, denying and reinterpreting the discriminatory or racist undertones of the treatment of immigrants in Finland. This questioning took place, for instance, by suggesting that asking someone ‘where are you from’ based on their appearance (i.e. microaggressions, e.g. Sue et al. 2007) is not racist. Questioning or trivialising the potentially problematic nature of these questions was often done by equating immigration with intra-national migration of the white Finnish population, followed by claims that white majority people who move from one part of Finland to another are bound to face some questions too. Discrimination and racism are thus normalised as a nuisance faced by everyone regardless of their ethnic or cultural belonging:

I too got the question ‘where do you come from, where are you from, how come you talk like that’. I also had to answer that. I do not see it as such a big problem, ‘where are you from’, then you say where you are from or where your mom and dad are from. Surely you can see looking at a dark [person] that, well, that one is not a Finn. (Event 8, Mar 2019)

Presenting the question ‘where are you from?’ for those considered not local or Finnish is here constructed as natural and justified based on (1) the white speaker’s own experiences of having been asked that and not personally considering it as problematic, and (2) people’s origin, be it geographical location of early life or ethnic genotype, as a self-evident and true defining factor playing a role in one’s group membership. The latter point also effectively places non-white people outside the borders of Finnishness.

In sum, employing and reconstructing the myth involved collectively constructing discrimination and racism as difficult to define or pinpoint, an eternal part of human life, and something that potentially affects everyone, including majority members and native minorities. On a few occasions, we as organisers also contributed to reinforcing the myth with corroborating comments, without noticing it at the time. Discrimination was thus normalised as an undiscriminating [sic] part of normal human life. The different variations of myths of discrimination and racism as minor problems work to suggest that talking about discrimination in Finland is often unfounded or unnecessary. For example, the comment presented above can be

seen as questioning the role of microaggressions as a form of racist discrimination. The myth can also function to portray the white majority as not responsible for the occurrence of discrimination and racism, as well as not required to fight against them.

MYTH OF PRIVILEGED IMMIGRANTS

As the name suggests, the myth of privileged immigrants describes immigrants as having a privileged position as a group in Finnish society compared to majority Finns. This involves portraying immigrants as enjoying luxury treatment in Finland, for instance, by receiving substantial benefits from the state based simply on their immigrant status. In our data, the myth was sometimes referred to as something other people believe in instead of something the speaker themselves commits to: 'My best friend from school (...), every time we meet, they lecture on how the foreigners are favoured and Finns are cast aside' (Event 2, Nov 2018).

At other times, the myth of privileged immigrants was oriented to as if it were a state of affairs that everyone knows to be true. For instance, one participant recounted an experience of their son witnessing men from the Middle East unfairly getting away with travelling without a valid ticket on a train and contrasting this to their son being 'a poor student' and 'always totally stressed out' and 'scared of the ticket inspectors' (Event 8, March 2019) when travelling without a ticket.

The myth of privileged immigrants can be used as a counter-argument for pleas to pay attention to the inferior position or discrimination of immigrants in Finland. It turns this idea upside down and presents the majority Finns as the real victims, therefore removing any of this majority's responsibility for racism.

MYTHS IN INTERACTION

While identifying the various myths regarding immigration is important, it is not in itself enough. We argue that in order to understand *why* they matter, it is necessary to examine *how* they function. This is why we turn next to analysing in more detail how the myth of privileged immigrants was employed and used in the context of the *Puhekupa* events.

First, we examine a single excerpt of interaction at one *Puhekupa* event and then make some more general remarks. The extract was chosen on the basis that it is a particularly rich and interesting example of myth use in our data. Through a detailed discursive analysis, we aim to show how the myth of privileged immigrants was employed to reach various interactional aims and locate it in a wider discursive context.

The exchange presented in the following extract took place in the early stages of one *Puhekupa* event after one participant (Speaker 14), on arriving late, asked the moderator (one of us researchers) to clarify the purpose of the event. The moderator briefly summarised what had been presented at the beginning of the event, highlighting that the aim of the *Puhekupa* events was to create respectful discussion and dialogue on immigration and intercultural encounters, not necessarily unanimity on the topic. After the presentation, one participant stated: 'We are all humans'. The moderator and two participants concurred, after which Speaker 6 commented: 'All immigrants are ok, except that, the way they behave here. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Be like us.' The moderator asked Speaker 6 to elaborate, but they refused.

The presentation of the *Puhekupa* event followed by the popular expression ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ can be seen as prompts for the first comment by Speaker 14:

- (1) Speaker 14: I’ll comment on this a bit, one day I went to an ATM and okay, there was this foreign man before me and he then took the receipt and I took a look out of spite and he had sixty-two thousand [euros] and I’ll bet that the Finnish government is paying him some welfare benefits. Why?
- (2) Moderator: mmmmm
- (3) Speaker 12: Shit, you’ve worked too cheap. [Laughter] [It’s your] own fault.
- (4) (Inaudible talk)
- (5) Moderator: That’s an interesting opening somehow. Should immigrants be poorer here than us?
- (6) Speaker 14: Yes.
- (7) Moderator: And why is that?
- (8) Speaker 14: Well the reason is (...) My guess is that in Finland there are a lot poorer [people] than foreigners [who] come here.
- (9) Speaker ?: I agree.
- (10) Speaker ?: They get a bit more than an ordinary ...
- (11) Speaker 14: ... an ordinary unemployed person who gets 400 euros a month. Then we have an immigrant who snatches 28 grand.
- (12) Moderator: Where does he snatch it from?
- (13) Speaker 14: I don’t know, I don’t get it. I don’t get it.
- (14) Moderator: Ok.
- (15) Speaker 14: All the expenses are covered, the apartments are paid for, cars are paid for, they drive goddamn BMWs. It hurts a bit sometimes, but I don’t mean like that, but it does just hurt a bit. All I have is a bike. (...)
- (16) Moderator: It, it ... immigrants don’t get any more money from any system than the Finns.
- (17) Speaker 14: They actually do. They actually do. (Event 13, Oct 2019)

Extract starts with Speaker 14’s story about their visit to an ATM during which they become a witness ‘out of spite’ to the (assumed) wealth of a stranger who is presented as a non-Finn. The facticity of the story is backed up by constructing it as the speaker’s own experience and by telling the exact sum that was seen on the receipt. In contrast, the source of the money is left uncertain, but it is suggested that the Finnish government is giving support to the stranger.

A story involving an immigrant making a withdrawal at an ATM and a majority Finnish narrator seeing a receipt that reveals a considerable sum of money in the immigrant’s bank account has circulated on Finnish online discussion forums for several years now and has been used to show that immigrants are misusing the Finnish social security system. Here, the story is met with humorous exclamations and laughter, through which other participants affirm it. While Speaker 12 flips the moral of the story to humorous effect (‘you’ve worked too cheap’), the story itself is not challenged. On the contrary, the comments by Speaker 12 affirm it. Humour and laughter can serve various functions in interaction (Heller 2005; Jefferson 1985; Sotkasiira & Ryynänen 2022); here, humour can be interpreted as dealing with a potentially sensitive situation

caused by Speaker 14's story, which mobilises the myth of privileged immigrants. The use of humour could have been also affected by the fact that some of the participants had had a few drinks.

The moderator invites the participants to continue the discussion through an interpretation of the story Speaker 14 told. In the omitted discussion that follows, a contrast is drawn between the current situation, where immigrants are presented as privileged compared to majority Finns, and the desirable situation, where immigrants are poorer than them. In the course of the discussion, this contrast is used to work up to the position of the majority Finnish underdog (cf. [Bauvois, Pyrhönen & Pyysiäinen 2022](#)), who, after a lifetime of being a hardworking, taxpaying, effortful citizen ([Gibson 2009](#)), gets significantly less social security benefits than immigrants. Together, the participants work up a narrative in which immigrants drive expensive cars at the expense of the Finnish government, while the majority of Finns are deprived of their bikes in order to be able to buy food. This discussion can thus be seen as taking the earned citizenship discourse ([Andreouli & Dashtipour 2014](#)) to the extreme and even carnivalizing it. The unequal treatment of the majority compared to immigrants is underlined through exaggeration and humour. It makes it more difficult to intervene or challenge this narrative, as it can be labelled as merely a joke. Presenting immigrants and/or their supporters as a threat to the 'people' is a common feature in political (e.g. [Hogan & Haltinner 2015](#); [Sakki & Pettersson 2016](#)) and lay ([Bauvois et al. 2022](#)) anti-immigration rhetoric. However, mobilising the myth of privileged immigrants and the figure of the Finnish underdog enables the threat scenario to be taken further, to question or reverse the power relations between the Finnish majority and immigrants. Such discourses contribute to constructing the 'White injury' narrative, which effectively reverses the victim/perpetrator binary ([Cacho 2000](#)). It is also possible to see echoes of far-right discourses such as the 'Great Replacement' theory (see, e.g. [Ekman 2022](#)) in this kind of talk.

In the selected extract, the myth of privileged immigrants is mobilised as a joint effort. The story about the encounter at the ATM, the humorous exaggerations, and the firm opposition to the moderator's attempts to challenge the myth, show how appealing the myth is. The myth functions to flip the discussion on racism and ethnic discrimination as it enables presenting the white majority Finns as underdogs and victims of a social security system that unjustly favours immigrants. This is one of the many examples of how the participants positioned themselves as 'oppressed' or victims placed at the bottom of the societal hierarchy in Finland in such a way that confounded the rather straightforward Freirean oppressor–oppressed dialectic. This was most obvious in, but not limited to, the instances in which the myth of privileged immigrants was used. Such a discursive twist could be interpreted as a textbook example of the logic of the myth in action in a very Freirean sense: the reality is purposefully presented in a way that helps to maintain the status quo in which the majority Finns in reality hold the position of power. When we take the Freirean perspective of the myth and consider how self-identification as oppressed is used to justify discrimination of another group, the logic of myths as hindering factors to equality seems clear. The circulating narratives pinpoint an easily digestible and emotionally appealing cause for one's own hardships, which might feel tempting to take as fact without reflecting further – this is the very logic of harmful myths in action. However, we argue that in these cases, an intersectional perspective, which takes into consideration the combinations of different modes of discrimination and privilege that social and political identities create, needs to be applied. This leads to

a more nuanced understanding of directing attention to the multiple categories of power where people are simultaneously both positioned and position themselves, as well as the intersecting patterns between different structures of power (e.g. Anthias 2013). Thus, the self-identification of some of the participants as oppressed (even though they did not use this particular phrasing) cannot and should not be contested, although it obviously should not function as justification for discrimination or racism. Also, if analysed from a wider structural perspective, it could also be argued that the position of white majority Finns in Finnish society is closer to the oppressor role in relation to asylum seekers and minority communities, especially when they take the position of reproducing false narratives that heighten discriminatory attitudes in society.

The myth of privileged immigrants did not appear in this conversation out of nowhere. As mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, the story about the encounter at the ATM has circulated in Finnish online discussions for years and functions to raise suspicion towards immigrants and the Finnish welfare system. This has also been a goal of the Finnish anti-immigration political movement, which has established its popularity and position as part of mainstream societal debates since the parliament elections of 2011 (e.g. Horsti 2015) and has been able to steer the political (Sakki & Pettersson 2018) and lay (Nortio et al. 2021) discourse of immigration, diversity and racism. Previous research has shown that nationalist anti-immigration discourse is constructed around the external other (immigrants) and internal others (Finns that support immigrants or multiculturalism, Sakki & Pettersson 2016). The myth of privileged immigrants includes both of these others.

The extract analysed above presents an example of myth circulating in the form of a ready-made anecdote. The other versions of the myth of privileged immigrants, as well as the myth of immigrants as profoundly different from majority Finns, were overall fairly coherent entities. The myth of discrimination and racism as a minor problem, however, was different in that instead of appearing in the form of easily recognisable tropes, in our data, the myth appeared to a large extent as jointly constructed through small pieces of conversation containing some elements or versions of the myth. These elements or versions of the myth of discrimination and racism as a minor problem were, in a sense, pieces of the same puzzle, which together produced the entity of the myth. In practice, the myth often seemed to exist rather as some kind of ethos that was shared by the participants and which they collectively defended. This was particularly the case at one of the events. At times, this led to similar ‘impermeable logic’ as can be seen in the extract presented in this section.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have approached myths as discursive constructions, that is, culturally and socially shared linguistic and interactional phenomena that can be used to make sense of the social world and, more specifically, to maintain and justify power hierarchies in society – intentionally or unintentionally. We have focused here on the problematic functions of three myths identified in our data as maintaining hierarchical relations between white majority members and immigrants in Finland and undermining the fight for equality and against racism. The myths we identified hinder recognition of inequalities and related problems in different ways. The myth of profound differences draws from and strengthens ethnic and cultural stereotypes that can be used to justify discrimination. The myth of racism as a minor problem

enables denial of inequalities and opposition to attempts to tackle them. The myth of privileged immigrants turns the existing hierarchies of Finnish society upside down. It can be used to challenge and even carnivalise minority voices and anti-racist discourse.

The Puhekupla collective was formed in the aftermath of 2015, when Finland received a record number of asylum seekers: 32,476 in comparison to the previous annual numbers of 1,500–6,000 in the 2000s (Ministry of the Interior, Finland). Among other consequences, the situation intensified anti-migration movements, many of them openly racist (Keskinen 2018; Mäkinen 2017). However, equality is one of the central elements in the narratives of Finnish national identity (e.g. Tuori 2007). Finland thus offers a fruitful context for studying myths of immigration and the ways in which they are used. Our results show how people in societal contexts that can be seen as ambivalent in relation to societal inequalities negotiate and justify hierarchies and power relations.

Our research brings a three-fold contribution to discussions relating to the rise of anti-immigrant movements in the Nordic countries and beyond: first, by directing attention to myths specifically as a societal mechanism of false perceptions and defensive rationalisations that work as ‘hindering factors’ to critical reflection on the social reality around us; second, by suggesting a novel way of researching and analysing the use of such myths; and third, by suggesting that the format of the Puhekupla events could be one opportunity to reflect on stubborn myths and contest harmful stereotypes.

We have argued that conceptualising a certain type of account as a myth and combining Freirean theorisations with DSP as an analytical framework to analyse the occurrence and use of myths adds to understanding of the ways in which social hierarchies and power relations are constructed, maintained and reproduced. The ‘false facts’ circulating in our societies have previously been analysed, for instance, from the perspective of immigration threat narratives mobilised by far-right anti-immigration movements (e.g. Hogan & Haltinner 2015). The traditional Freirean conception of myth is based on the idea of the structural intentionality that lies behind such harmful discursive constructions. Our analysis, which also considers the occurrence of myths in everyday interactions, deepens understanding of the ways in which myths are used and reproduced and offers tools to tackle them. This is why we have also drawn from DSP, which offers tools to examine language use in detail. We consider the theoretical and methodological approach developed in this article as our key contribution to the literature.

Moreover, the Puhekupla process can be seen as a contribution to the Freirean tradition, as the events themselves aimed to serve as forums for critical reflection in the Freirean spirit. On several occasions, inequality between the white majority members and immigrants in Finland, as well as the role of the majority members in maintaining the unequal status quo, were addressed, and opportunities for fighting discrimination were collectively examined. This was done by reflecting on the examples introduced by the organisers in the form of vignettes, as well as discussing personal experiences shared by participants. Although we did not originally have Freirean ‘myth busting’ in mind when organising the events, we feel that occasionally they did attain that function, in the sense that they encouraged participants to pay attention to the white privilege and oppressive power relations between the majority and minority groups in Finland. From the perspective of Freirean myths in action, the Puhekupla events

also appeared to be a contested space. While some oppressive attitudes, ideas and actions were critically examined and found by the participants to be problematic, the events also appeared as a battlefield in which stubborn myths were introduced and even reinforced to justify the privileged position of the majority and to turn a blind eye to discrimination and inequality.

Overall, this article contributes to studies on ethnic relations and racism by suggesting a novel approach to studying social inequality in the Nordic countries and beyond. We have combined the Freirean approach to myths with a critical discursive approach in order to recognise the ways in which social inequality is legitimised and (re)produced by the use of language. Freire (2014) developed an approach to liberation education with the purpose of supporting people to achieve a more critically informed understanding of the reality they live in and of the structures that shape their lives but are not inevitable, in the sense that they can be transformed. We argue, in line with Freire, that such an approach requires learning to understand and critically reflect not only on the 'objective' and 'subjective' factors of the surrounding reality, but also on myths, which are the enemies of critical reflection.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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The article is the result of the joint reflection of the authors. Sanna Ryynänen has had the main responsibility in Sections 1, 2, 3 and 6; Emma Nortio and Sirkku Varjonen have had the main responsibility in Sections 4 and 5.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Sanna Ryynänen  orcid.org/0000-0001-8918-8203
University of Eastern Finland, FI

Emma Nortio  orcid.org/0000-0003-3102-5537
University of Eastern Finland, FI

Sirkku Varjonen  orcid.org/0000-0001-7535-651X
Kuntoutussäätiö, FI

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