

Working Life for Everyone? podcast: Shadia Rask

Interviewer: You're listening to Working Life for Everyone, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work and discuss the inequalities of the Finnish labor market with people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about them. My name is Jarkko Immonen and I am one of the career counsellors of the University of Helsinki career services.

Today we talk about racism and the language barrier. I am joined by research manager Shadia Rask from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. She is currently working on two very interesting projects which we are going to discuss in more detail in a minute. In her career, she has done a lot of research in public health and also holds a PhD in the field, from the University of Helsinki in fact. With her dissertation focusing on the relationships between discrimination and health, Ms. Rask is very actively engaged in, or should I say, one of the leading voices in the public discourse about ethnic and linguistic discrimination in our society. She is also a very sought after speaker and a commentator in all matters of racism and discrimination, which is just one of the reasons I am so grateful that you took the time to come on our little podcast, it is truly an honor. Welcome to the show Shadia Rask.

Shadia Rask: Thank you Jarkko.

Interviewer: Before going into today's themes and the projects I mentioned, let's talk about you for a moment. One thing I often discuss with our doctoral candidates is, you know, "Should I stay or should I go" as The Clash so eloquently put it, namely the prospect of working outside the academia, and how then still be able to utilize your expertise in research at least to an extent? Based on what I was able to read about your career up until now, it seems that you have struck a kind of balance between doing research and other stuff. Also, you seem to have kind of gone back and forth between, or maybe found a way to combine working inside and outside the academia without ever really straying too far off from doing, or utilizing, research in your work.

Are these fair assumptions to make, and if so, could you tell us a little bit about your career from this point of view? Or if they're not, feel free to correct my errors and provide some more pertinent insights into your career and life after the PhD.

Shadia Rask: Well thank you for the invitation and kind introduction, and as you described, I have been working at THL, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare for more than twelve years now and I found your description accurate.

Working in a research institute is kind of outside of the university but still not too far and if I share two stories from my career, the first one from the very beginning, so how did I end up

in THL. It was actually through my master's thesis that I conducted in collaboration with THL, and for all of the masters students listening to this podcast, I want to encourage you that internships and thesis collaborations do open up doors and they are very important times and places to get your foot in between the door.

And if I think about my life after the PhD and what has changed in relation to me doing research, I have found that after defending my PhD, which was four years ago, the time that I do pure research has decreased. But then on the other hand, I have researchers in the project that I lead who do research that I'm involved in and that I guide.

And then, on the other hand, kind of the time and platforms for communicating research and popularizing research, that has definitely increased since my PhD, and today what keeps me connected to the university is that I have couple PhDs who I guide. I'm a member in several PhD steering groups and also, from time to time I give visiting lectures. So that keeps me not too far.

Interviewer: Thank you. And another question which students and doctoral candidates often ponder is what ultimately constitutes work and/or career. What kind of roles have different forms of work such as activism, volunteering, communal activities, or other so-called alternative types of work played in your career path?

Shadia Rask: Yes, this is a really interesting and topical question, because if we think about all in all us as a society, and how our relationship and understanding of what work is, what constitutes a career, is changing and it's increasingly something other than nine to five and being employed by one employer for decades. My path so far however, has been quite traditional, so as I mentioned working already in my second decade for the same employer, THL, with very much kind of traditional office hours.

But as for the different roles, more recently and in the past years it's been trying to strike a balance between work and life, mainly family, so having less time to be involved in volunteering or communal activities. But these definitely have played an important role in kind of putting together who I am as a person, but also as an aspiring professional, and also kind of finding out and identifying what I'm interested in.

So, already as an eleven year old I was involved in an NGO aiming to build global friendships. And through that same NGO in my late teens as a nineteen year old, I volunteered in an international people's project in Italy, working with undocumented youth, and when thinking about this question, that was maybe one of the key experiences that led me then to apply for a master's degree with a major in international health.

Interviewer: Are there any lessons you have learned that you would like to share with a younger version of yourself still working on, or thinking about starting their PhD?

Shadia Rask: Well I think the saying that there is only one way to eat an elephant, a bite at a time, is very fitting for doing a PhD, because it's a big project, but it can be accomplished when broken into smaller pieces and smaller bites. My PhD was article based so the four sub-studies formed more manageable sub-goals, and it was definitely easier working on the last third, fourth article and sub-study than the first two.

So, kind of your competence and skills evolve and you have a better picture of what you need to do. But then maybe also one thing that I would share and encourage a younger version of myself, is that a PhD is not only hard work, but it is also a lot of fun. There's a lot of peer support, like related to the process, but also there are celebrations, so the PhD defense day and the karonkka party, they are fantastic, and I also just participated in the ceremonial conferment of doctoral degrees this summer, which was also a lot of fun and also very, very special, so not just hard work but also fun.

Interviewer: Wise words. Alright, let's get to it. As said, you are currently working in two very interesting projects, called Manifold More and Towards Non-discrimination in Working Life, respectively. I thought we would discuss these projects one by one starting with the latter, if that's alright with you?

Shadia Rask: Sure.

Interviewer: If I'm not mistaken, the Non-discrimination in Working Life project had two aims, one to provide the powers that be with information about the forms and mechanics of discrimination in the Finnish world of work and some suggestions for dismantling them, and two to investigate discrimination in the context of recruitment, is that correct?

Shadia Rask: Yes.

Interviewer: The project's report lists a variety of factors that elicit discrimination. The ones that I think are the most relevant for the topics for this episode however, are ethnic, linguistic and religious discrimination. What can you say about the findings regarding these modes of discrimination?

Shadia Rask: Yes, so this was a research project carried out by the labor institute for economic research together with THL, and the part of the study that was conducted by THL examined the prevalence of discrimination in working life using different data sets, so surveys, register-based data, and also data that we have from different authorities. And

then, the part of the study that was conducted by the labor institute for economic research focused on the best practices to prevent discrimination in recruitment and this was done by conducting a literature review and the analyzing the anonymous recruitment experiment and pilot of the city of Helsinki.

And what we've found in our study conducted by THL was that there are multiple groups that are discriminated against in recruitment and in working life, and if we think about specifically like ethnic and linguistic based discrimination, we found that among a population with a foreign background in Finland, the most common types of workplace discrimination are discriminatory attitudes of work colleagues and superiors, secondly discrimination in career advancement, and thirdly pay discrimination.

And the existence of racism was also prevalent in the results as these discriminatory attitudes of colleagues and superiors, they were most often experienced by persons who have moved to Finland from African countries, especially countries other than those in North Africa.

Interviewer: Mmh. One thing that is extensively discussed in the report is anonymous recruitment. What do you personally make of it, is it a good tool for dismantling racism in recruitment or is it more like a plaster for treating a symptom without curing the illness? Or none, or both of the above?

Shadia Rask: So in the Towards Non-discrimination in Working Life literature review, the researchers found that unfortunately there is no single intervention that successfully and with credible evidence can combat discrimination, and systematically function to reduce discrimination in recruitment. At the same time, like the anonymous recruitment pilot of the city of Helsinki, it was promising, so persons with a foreign sounding name and applicants above 55 years of age, they benefitted from the anonymization of the process. But then at the same time, this anonymous process did not have an effect on gender equality, so the findings are kind of two-fold.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Shadia Rask: I also have experience of a partially anonymous recruitment. In our Manifold More project we tried out an anonymous sample text, so when we were recruiting two researchers, we started off by evaluating all the applicants by using a sample text, a one page skills demonstration. Our kind of hands-on experience was that it was a good way, and a reminder to focus on skills and try to kind of limit the effect that the biases and stereotypes that all of us humans have. So to limit those and to really try to focus on skills and not what comes to our minds from people's names or ages or genders.

But kind of as said, a single intervention is not enough. It can just, for example in the case of doing an anonymous recruitment, if at the same time other interventions aren't put into place and there aren't training in place for example related to unconscious biases, then anonymizing the application process can just postpone the discrimination from the application phase to the interview phase, because interviews are very rarely anonymized.

Interviewer: Mmh. I think it's also worth noting that discrimination in recruitment is not solely a question of getting employed or not. From the report *Yhdenvertainen Suomi*, loosely translating to *An Equal Finland*, by the Ministry of Justice published in 2021, as well as from other numerous studies and surveys, we know that people with an immigrant background may face additional challenges in finding employment that matches their education. How would you describe racism in the Finnish world of work from the perspective of people with higher education?

Shadia Rask: This is a really important question, and actually one of the main goals of our *Manifold More* project. And from research we find that particularly foreign background women do not advance in their careers corresponding to their education. So the share of overqualified among highly-educated and employed persons is more than one in three among foreign background women, as compared to one in five in Finnish background women. And discrimination and racism are one explanation for this even though not the only one.

Interviewer: Mmh. And kind of continuing on the *Manifold More* project, this project aims specifically to leverage the professional careers of immigrant background women as you've said, by creating tools for employers to produce their mandatory gender equality plans and using research-based information to challenge the stereotypes associated with immigrant background women. Can you tell us a little bit more about this project, and what have been the key take-aways and has it changed you perceptions of the Finnish world of work, or the Finnish corporate cultures in some ways?

Shadia Rask: Well, firstly, I want to say that I've been very positively surprised with how much interest and momentum there has been around the topics of diversity, equality and inclusion, like during the whole time of the project, almost three years now. And I think that has been something very, very special, and has also opened up doors for us as a project to speak and train, more than we had initially even expected or dreamed. What our project is best known maybe is this recruitment experiment that we conducted and I already a little bit mentioned, so in short, we recruited two researchers to THL two years ago, and had the opportunity to try out five diversity promoting methods for the first time in recruitments done at our institute.

And these five methods were using a diversity clause in the work ad, so kind of explicitly encouraging and stating that we hope to have applicants of different diverse backgrounds, then our second method was critical assessment of the level of Finnish language that we actually need to require for those researcher positions. Then the third method was this anonymous sample text which we talked about, and then the fourth method was communicating about the job ads visually and through networks.

And since we had critically assessed the level of Finnish language that we needed and came to the conclusion that we need fluency in English but actually in those researcher positions where the aim is to produce international research, like for international journals, then like fluency in English is most highly needed and we can require a lower level of Finnish language that is sufficient to do those jobs well. So this led to the fact that it was natural for us to then publish and communicate the jobs also not only in Finnish but also in English. Instead of the typical of just putting the job ads on THL's webpage and to the government's valtiolle.fi and then just waiting to see who applies, we were very proactive in sharing the job ads on social media, on different e-mail mailing lists, and looking especially for example on Facebook for groups where the aim of the group gave us a hint that these members could potentially be interested in a project like ours.

And then the final fifth method was investing in recruitment communications, so trying to make sure throughout the process that our recruitment came across to the applicants as fair and transparent and making sure that we give a good picture of THL as an employer. And what we found out, what the end result was, that using these five methods, we were successful in increasing or receiving a diverse pool of applicants a big number of applications. So we actually received a hundred and twenty applications from 95 different applicants to the two positions. And this is a key way to improve the chances to find the best experts for the job, if you have candidates from different backgrounds.

And one of the indicators which spoke to how diverse the pool of applicants was, was that among the 95 people who applied, they spoke 26 different first languages, and we don't have reference data from other similar recruitments in THL, but the feeling is that this definitely is more diverse than usual.

And I think that the key take-away maybe from the whole experiment has been that the power of example is significant, so when we've been training and sharing these experiences with other organizations, the reception has been very eager and enthusiastic. And kind of the main message has been that hey if your research institute, which is a government research institute, can do something like this and recruit in a new and creative way, then surely our organization can also do something about this.

Interviewer: Mmh. Well would you say that, and I'm now thinking about our students who struggle with racism and the language barrier and so on in their careers, are these kind of, do you see these as the trending thing so to speak, are they something that people can already start to look for and kind of expect from people doing recruitment and putting out job ads? Or are we still talking about a more like storm in a teacup kind of a thing.

Shadia Rask: I do see that it is trending and it is becoming more mainstream, and definitely there are like forerunners in this, and then there are those who are kind of slowly realizing that hey this is something that needs to be payed attention to, non-discrimination and equality. But definitely I do see that there is a shift, previously maybe the focus has been very much on individuals and the tips have been kind of like just brush up you CV, stay positive, and smile, and doors will open, and not to say that that wouldn't be important, like doing your part. Of course that's important, but then at the same time, it isn't enough if we just put the responsibility on individuals themselves and we don't look at the structures and barriers that exist, not because of individuals, but because of the system and the structures in organizations.

So I think that this is something that is kind of trending or becoming more acknowledged and aware of in our society and within our organizations, and these kinds of systematic recruitment methods, if they are put into place and made part of the organization's equality plans, so not just individual pilots and experiments, but actually something that's systematically done when recruiting, or throughout HR processes, then that is something that is increasing and I see as very important.

Interviewer: Mmh. You already kind of alluded to this in your previous answer, but one major issue prevalent in the Manifold More project and also pertaining to our theme is the language barrier, namely the generally high level of Finnish and/or Swedish skills required in recruitment across the board. What do you make of it in terms of racism, are the two phenomena linked, and if so, how?

Shadia Rask: Yes, so what we know from population studies is that language difficulties are the most experience difficulty to employment among foreign background persons in Finland, so up to half of those with a foreign background consider lack of Finnish or Swedish language as an obstacle to employment. Then at the same time we have surveys that have looked at the attitudes of recruiters we have found that fewer than one in four recruiters are ready to hire someone who doesn't have fluent Finnish language skills. And to your question, whether or not discrimination is related to those language requirements, yes and no. So of course there are language requirements that are grounded and necessary, but at the same time they do also hide stereotypes and hide biases. And the tool and what we need is that each time we are recruiting is that there would be this critical assessment of okay what kind of skills do we actually need in this position, and whether or not fluency in Finnish and/or Swedish is actually required.

Interviewer: Mmh. From where you are standing, does it look like the barrier is as strong and intact as ever or is it cracking in places? By and large, do you think that Finnish corporate cultures are open and/or willing to change in this respect or not and why so?

Shadia Rask: Well, I'm an optimist, so I want to say that we are seeing cracks and I think that one of the most powerful ways of creating those cracks and momentum is these concrete examples and cases and solutions that are shared between organizations. And definitely language awareness is one concrete solution and way to create more inclusive work places. But I feel that is not only stemming or coming from a willingness and enthusiasm but also a necessity, because if we think about the population structure in Finland, and the current discussion around we don't have enough working aged people, we don't have enough skilled employees, we need to compete with other countries to attract international talents.

So it's not only out of enthusiasm and willingness, but also the necessity that our work life and organizations need skilled laborers. And if we want to attract international talents and if we want to keep those international students that are already living in Finland and are looking for jobs that would match their education and interests, then we need to work on our corporate cultures and the way that we recruit and the requirements that we put in place.

Interviewer: Are there some common misconceptions about the racism regarding the Finnish labor market and/or the language barrier? If so, feel free to correct them here and now.

Shadia Rask: Well, I would say one common misconception is that using different languages side-by-side, for example, in the Manifold More project we've been using a so-called hybrid model, so using Finnish and English very flexibly in our meetings, in the way we work side-by-side. So a misconception is that something like that would be very difficult or impossible within Finnish institutes or organizations that are mainly operating in Finnish. It's not impossible. It requires creative solutions, it requires sometimes sitting down and rethinking things, it requires kind of being willing to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes and really trying to build an environment and work community, which is psychologically safe. Safe for those who are working with developing Finnish language skills, but also for those who maybe feel fear and are challenged by change and having to work and learn to work in new ways.

But really language and language awareness is something that comes naturally to us as humans, it's created and it forms in interactions and like we humans can be endlessly creative, so it's a misconception that it wouldn't be possible within Finland or Finnish organizations.

And then a second misconception actually came to mind related to racism and work life, and that would be that very often the misconception is that racism is something that is kind of situated within the margins of society, and the image that comes to mind is that some person may be yelling racist remarks on the metro or somewhere and we think that oh this is something that doesn't exist within our workplaces, and definitely not within the

university, or highly educated expert organizations. And this isn't true. So when we talk about racism in work life, we are not only talking about single events that occur between people or within interactions, but one really important level of racism is this systemic structural racism, and that's something that's interwoven into our society and into the daily ways that we operated and the norms that we have in place, so that's a misconception that I often aim and try to correct.

Interviewer: Racism is not a new thing, it's no flash in the pan, its roots go deep into our history, if you think back to your own student days or when you were only taking the first steps in your career, has anything changed, if so, has it been for the better or for the worse?

Shadia Rask: Absolutely I would say that things have changed for the better and have gone forward, there is much more attention, discussion and research on the prevalence of racism and discrimination and the effects that it has on health and wellbeing, so from that perspective there is change for the better. On the other hand, power and privilege, they are still unequally distributed, and if we look at research and curricula, they are still very white, very eurocentric. So there is plenty of work still left to be done.

Interviewer: Mmh. On that note, how do you perceive the future regarding racism in the working life, what do you predict it will look like in say five or ten years, and if you think that there is hope for a better tomorrow, why do you believe so?

Shadia Rask: I do believe that there is hope for a better tomorrow, and one of the reasons is that we're seeing increasingly more representation in media, in positions of power within academia, and through individual people voicing concerns and being able to have platforms to voice also previously marginalized perspectives through role models, through these examples, the norms of what expertise looks like and what different professionals look like, they are challenged. So through individual forerunners and role models we can achieve change and a better tomorrow.

Even though change is slow and there is pushback and sometimes you hear the claim that equality has gone too far, but that's not true, equality has not gone too far, instead it's the unfair and unequal status quo that has gone on for too long. But it is understandable that change raises also fears and concerns, what does this mean for me, for my position, for my privilege if there is now so much talk about non-discrimination and equality in work life. And I think it's really important to stress and understand that an equal and non-discriminatory society and work life, that it is for all of us and that it benefits all of us.

Interviewer: What would you like to say to our students struggling with racism in their lives and careers right now?

Shadia Rask: I'd want to say that you're not alone in those experiences and the existence of racism in Finnish society, in societies and work life, it's not an opinion, it's a fact that we have a lot research evidence on, so whether or not someone has personally experienced or seen racism or discrimination, they do exist. And for individual students I'd like to encourage you to seek support, peer support but also support from the service system and to report to the authorities when feeling that one has been discriminated against. So for example The Non-discrimination Ombudsman is an authority that one can turn to if experiencing or witnessing discrimination.

And I also want to encourage and share that there is a lot of work being done within organization and a lot of effort being put into changing work life and changing the society in Finland for better, for example, THL is publishing an online course and online training on anti-racism for professionals, and it will be released in the end of this year, 2022.

And even though it may not help in an individual case and situation just right now, but through those kinds of efforts, I do see and believe that we will have better informed professionals also in matters related to anti-racism and fighting against racism in the near future.

Interviewer: And dear listener, for more information about the anti-racism course Shadia just mentioned, feel free to listen to the episode of this podcast where we talk with Ms. Mona Eid also from THL, and of course head over to the THL website for the actual thing. Anything more you want to add?

Shadia Rask: Just my warmest thanks for this discussion, it was great being a guest and I'm really happy that we were able to touch upon so many important topics related to work life in Finland.

Interviewer: Thank you so much Shadia for being here it has been an absolute pleasure.

Shadia Rask: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to working life for everyone, this podcast was brought to you by the University of Helsinki career services.

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