

## **Analysing Immigrant Life Stories from two Perspectives**

Sirkku Varjonen

EURODIV PAPER 27.2006

**DECEMBER 2006**

**KTHC - Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital**

Sirkku Varjonen, *Master of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki*

This paper can be downloaded without charge at:

The Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei Series Index:

<http://www.feem.it/Feem/Pub/Publications/EURODIVpapers/default.htm>

The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position of  
Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei  
Corso Magenta, 63, 20123 Milano (I), web site: [www.feem.it](http://www.feem.it), e-mail: [working.papers@feem.it](mailto:working.papers@feem.it)

The special issue on *Cultural Diversity* collects a selection of papers presented at the multidisciplinary and multinational Marie Curie project on “Cultural diversity in Europe: A series of Conferences” (EURODIV).

**EURODIV** focuses on cultural diversity in Europe and aims to understand the ways of dealing with diversity and its dynamics in the globalisation era. Its primary objective is to provide top-level training opportunities to researchers in the first years of their research career. EURODIV is a four-year project (2006-2009) co-ordinated by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM) and supported by the European Commission, Sixth Framework Programme, Marie Curie Conferences and Training Courses (contract no. MSCF-CT-2004-516670).

Schedule of Conferences:

- **First Conference “Understanding diversity: Mapping and measuring”**, 26-27 January 2006, FEEM, Milano, Italy. Contact person: Valeria Papponetti, [valeria.papponetti@feem.it](mailto:valeria.papponetti@feem.it)
- **Second Conference “Qualitative diversity research: Looking ahead”**, 19-20 September 2006, K.U.Leuven, Leuven, Belgium. Contact person: Maddy Janssens, [maddy.janssens@econ.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:maddy.janssens@econ.kuleuven.ac.be), and Patrizia Zanoni, [patrizia.zanoni@kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:patrizia.zanoni@kuleuven.ac.be)
- **Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”**, 11-12 September 2007, UCL, London, UK. Contact person: Valeria Papponetti, [valeria.papponetti@feem.it](mailto:valeria.papponetti@feem.it)
- **Fourth Conference “Diversity in cities: New models of governance”**, 16-17 September 2008, IPRS, Rome, Italy. Contact person: Raffaele Bracalenti, [iprs.it@iprs.it](mailto:iprs.it@iprs.it)
- **Fifth Conference “Dynamics of diversity in the globalisation era”**, 15-16 September 2009, FEEM, Milan, Italy. Contact person: Valeria Papponetti, [valeria.papponetti@feem.it](mailto:valeria.papponetti@feem.it)

EURODIV goes in parallel with SUS.DIV, the Network of Excellence on sustainable development in a diverse world. For further information on EURODIV and SUS.DIV, please visit the web site: [www.ebos.com.cy/susdiv](http://www.ebos.com.cy/susdiv).

This batch of papers has been presented at the Second EURODIV Conference “Qualitative diversity research: Looking ahead”

## **Analysing Immigrant Life Stories from two Perspectives**

### **Summary**

In this paper I will analyse how six immigrants living in Finland narrate and make sense of their life and acculturation experiences in their autobiographical life stories. The first stories of this narrative research data have been produced in 2000 – 2001 and the follow-up stories by the same participants are produced in 2005 – 2006. I look at my data from two different perspectives, using a theory-driven acculturation approach and data-driven approach. The results of my analysis show that the most common acculturation related themes are comparison between Finland and country of origin, and discrimination. The frequency and the ways these themes are discussed vary both between the writers as well as the same writer's two stories. On the data-driven side I examine how families and acculturation are talked about and note that partners are described emphasizing similarities between the narrator and partner while acculturation related themes are typically discussed in relation to children and their upbringing. I also look at the distinctions the participants use to make sense of their lives. For positioning oneself and expressing and negotiating identity and belonging the narrators use various individual distinctions. Studying immigrant narratives suggest that acculturation interweaves the life course of an individual in complex ways. The results imply that examining autobiographical narrative data and combining data- and theory-driven approaches could contribute to immigrant and acculturation research, by opening new insights into the ways immigrants interpret and make sense of their experiences.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Life Stories, Narratives, Acculturation, Methodology, Qualitative Research

*One of the research objectives of my ongoing doctoral thesis is to find out how individual immigrants living in Finland narrate and makes sense of their life and acculturation. In this paper I will focus on this topic, primarily from a methodological point of view. I will present the methodological construction for my qualitative analysis and introduce some preliminary results of the analysis conducted with a small part of my data. Finally I will evaluate the design of my two-fold analysis in the context of my findings.*

*Address for correspondence:*

Sirkku Varjonen  
Master of Social Sciences  
University of Helsinki  
Unioninkatu 37, 2.krs (PL 54)  
00014 Helsingin yliopisto  
Finland  
Phone: +358 50 368 38 92  
E-mail: sirkku.varjonen@helsinki.fi

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Acculturation and adaptation	4
1.2 Locating my research and my approach	4
<b>2. Data</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Description of data	5
2.2 The way I look at my data	6
<b>3. Development and use of the two analytical approaches: the theory-driven and data-driven analysis</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 Theory-driven analysis	7
3.2 Data-driven analysis	7
3.3 Going back and forth	8
<b>4. Preliminary results</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1 Theory-driven analysis: Acculturation talk	8
4.1.1 Comparisons between Finland and narrator's country of origin	8
4.1.2 Discrimination	10
4.2 Data driven analysis	13
4.2.1 Key theme: Family talk	13
4.2.2 Distinctions (and parallels)	15
<b>5. Discussion: Comparing and combining the approaches</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Sources</b>	<b>21</b>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Acculturation and adaptation

Acculturation can be defined as individual and group level changes resulting from groups of individual from different cultures coming to contact with each other (Redfield et al. 1936. Ref. Liebkind 2001, 386).

Acculturation has originally been viewed as a group level phenomenon, later the concept of psychological acculturation was also introduced. Psychological acculturation refers to the changes in individual's values, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, identity and behaviour, which are rooted in the encounter with a new culture. (See Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002; Liebkind 2001).

Berry's acculturation theory is one of the best known. In his theory immigrant's relation to ethnic culture and majority culture are measured on two distinct dimensions. Like many other researchers, Berry sees individual's acculturation experiences as potentially stressful and examines both acculturation stress as well as moderating factors in his model. According to the current view however, there is no deterministic relationship between stressors and psychological adaptation. The result depends on many mediating factors such as acculturation strategy, the phase of acculturation, demographic factors such as age and social status and interpretation of acculturation experiences, use of coping strategies and factors related to receiving society. (Berry et al. 1992, 285, Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000, 54-55.)

In the group-level empirical Finnish acculturation research, the acculturation attitudes, social relationships and psychological well-being of immigrants are examples of issues researched (e.g.: Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 1997; Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003). Immigrants' experiences of discrimination and racism have also been widely researched (see Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 1997 ja 2001; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002). Majority of acculturation research has been carried out by using quantitative research methods both in Finland and internationally. Recently there have been some indications of an increase in multidisciplinary and multi-method research. One example of this is a recent Finnish study which charts life, living conditions, social exclusion, discrimination, well-being and acculturation of Russian and Estonian immigrants and Ethnic Finns from abroad, from many different angles (Liebkind et al. 2004).

## 1.2 Locating my research and my approach

Considered from an international point of view, scientific research is currently in a phase in which we should move on from describing the adaptation process of immigrants to better understanding and explaining the phenomena (Perhoniemi and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2006, 21).

By conducting quantitative survey research with large samples, one can establish links between adaptation and various variables. However, this kind of research does not shed much light on the phenomenon on an individual level. Neither does it provide

answers for questions about how acculturation and life in a new country look like as narrated by immigrants themselves. Despite of being recognised for his extensive acculturation models and *group level* empirical research, Berry (2002, 33) has also stated that it is essential to study acculturation at the level of the individual too.

I am interested in the subjective experiences individual immigrants have regarding their acculturation and life in Finland and the ways they make sense and interpret these experiences. These qualitative elements could be seen as examples of those intervening factors that regulate the psychological adaptation of an immigrant who is being exposed to the stressors of acculturation (see Berry et al. 1992). These are the issues I will focus on in my current research paper as well.

My thinking is influenced by narrative approach, which according to Hänninen (1999, 15-18) refers to a school of qualitative research, which regards narrative as a central mode of thinking and making sense of life. According to Hanne (2001, 634) "narrative appears to be one of the most fundamental mechanisms we possess for organizing, and giving sense to, the flux of experience."

Huttunen, (2002), Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2000) and Rapoport et al. (2002) have all used written or oral narratives as their research material when studying immigrants and their ways of making sense of their lives and themselves. I share the view of narratively orientated researchers that story, narrative is a natural way to human being to give sense to one's experiences. Because I was interested in finding out, which issues the immigrant participants themselves would hold as meaningful and worth telling, I ended up gathering a free form narrative data, in order to minimize my own influence on the data.

## **2. Data**

### **2.1 Description of data**

The data I use in this paper is part of my doctoral research data. The 6 participants, whose stories are examined here, narrated their first stories during the winter 2000 – 2001. They produced their follow-up stories 6 years later, in 2005-2006, by which time they were 27 to 44 years old and had been living in Finland for 7 to 15 years.<sup>1</sup> They told or wrote their stories in English or Finnish as these were the only alternatives I was able to offer based on my own language skills. At the time of the first story I asked the participants to write/tell a story about their adaptation and life in Finland. I emphasised that the form and length of the story are completely up to the storyteller to decide. In the later phase in 2005-2006 I left the word "adaptation" out of the instructions and simply asked the participants to tell about their lives, especially the time after the first story, the way they wished. The participants, 2 women and 4 men, are Anita from Hungary, Maria from Peru, Vladimir from the former USSR, Kemal from Turkey, Benjamin from Israel and Cecile from Canada.<sup>2</sup> Anita and Maria

---

<sup>1</sup> I collected the 2000-2001 stories originally for the purpose of my Master's thesis research and when I later continued my studies I decided to try and collect the follow-up stories from the same participants.

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms. I have also changed the names of a few geographical locations in the stories in order to prevent the participants being identified.

have told both of their stories orally while I recorded them, rest of the participants have sent me a written story. Anita and Vladimir have told/written their stories originally in Finnish and I have translated myself the quotations I use in this paper. Other participants told/wrote their stories in English.

## 2.2 The way I look at my data

My approach is rooted in social constructionist thinking. I view the life stories that make up my data as the narrator's construction of his or her interpretation and way of making sense of reality; his/her life in Finland and things influencing it. I don't consider the texts to be simple windows to the narrator's (inner or externally observable) reality, but I don't consider them to be disconnected from the reality (outside the texts) either. Like Huttunen (2002, 36) states: "People select and edit what they narrate, they exclude and include things, remember wrong and forget. Past events or current thoughts can not be served the reader as such. They have to be put into words, framed as a part of a certain kind of a story, certain kind of causal relationships, certain kind of moral landscape."<sup>3</sup>

I believe that while the stories tell us something about the reality of the people who have produced them, at the same time they also construct reality, thus I consider writing or telling a story as action. Therefore I also share the following articulation of Huttunen (2002, 23): "My conception of language is a loosely constructionist one. I start from the assumption, that language does not only describe world in a simple way, but also produces meanings, interpretations and orders, which have concrete consequences. However, the construction and (re)interpretation taking place in language is not arbitrary, but in relation to its context."<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the stories don't open us an immediate access to the narrator's inner world of experiences and meanings, because in addition to matters related to narrators' motives, memory and active processing of information, the shape and content of the stories are also influenced by instructions I have given to participants as well as various cultural conventions.

---

<sup>3</sup> Translation: S. V.

<sup>4</sup> Translation: S. V.

### **3. Development and use of the two analytical approaches: the theory-driven and data-driven analysis**

#### **3.1 Theory-driven analysis**

First I read the stories collected in 2000 – 2001 as adaptation or acculturation stories only and expected them to contain descriptions of acculturation experiences and interpretations or these. By acculturation experiences I refer to experiences related to acculturation process, i.e. experiences of becoming in touch with a new culture and the resulting changes.<sup>5</sup> I was reading and coding the data with a thematic orientation, focusing my attention above all on elements and indicators of acculturation. This part of my analysis could be called theory-driven as my observations were guided and directed by Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind's immigrant studies on the Finnish side (e.g. Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002; Liebkind 2001; Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind, 1997 and 2001) and Berry's publications on his acculturation model (e.g. Berry 1990; 1997; Berry et al. 1992) and work of Ward and Searle (Searle and Ward 1990; Ward 1996) on the international side.

#### **3.2 Data-driven analysis**

At this point my approach so far strongly rooted in the acculturation research began to seem far too narrow. Therefore I decided to forget about my presuppositions concerning the life-stories and begun reading them again afresh from a more data-driven approach, identifying different themes, concepts, juxtapositions and dynamics the stories contained.

The more I read the stories, the clearer it seemed to me that examining the stories as acculturation stories only didn't do justice to the diversity of them. So I broadened my scope and begun to read the narratives as stories about the narrators' lives in Finland.

I also noticed, that contrary to my expectations, majority of the stories resemble autobiographical essays more than narratives with a distinct beginning, mid point and end. I borrow the sparsely used concept of autobiographical essay from Fakundiny (2001, 79) who defines it either as an essay, which tackles a part of a writer's own life or as a short autobiography with essay like characteristics.

All in all my data-driven analysis method included features of some of the most common content analysis procedures such as identifying themes present in the stories, but also features of discourse analytic methods and narrative analysis. As a preliminary step I created a summary of content for each story. This links my method with the narrative approach. Specification of cultural categories and distinctions narrators use to put their story together on the other hand, brings the analysis closer to

---

<sup>5</sup> Within Berry's acculturation models the concept of acculturation experience typically refers to an immediate experience of encountering a new culture, without the appraisal following the experience, as well as the quality and quantity of these experiences, i.e., the "exposure" to the cultures meeting (see Berry et al. 1987, 493; Berry 1992, 76). Thus my definition of acculturation experiences is broader than Berry's, because it also covers possible experiences of acculturation stress and adaptation, which in Berry's model are seen as phenomena following acculturation experiences.

discourse analysis. Examples of these distinctions are different actors and positions within the stories and distinctions between different objects and phenomena.

### **3.3 Going back and forth**

I used the above described procedure of theory- and data-driven analysis and the summaries of content all over again when analysing the follow-up stories written by same authors in 2005-2006. This time I used Atlas.ti computer program for coding the new stories as well as recoding the old ones.

Later, returning to my theory-driven analysis, with the help of Atlas.ti I created a code family consisting of all the different codes that I related to acculturation (i.e. arranged related codes under the umbrella code “acculturation”). I had used these codes to mark the text parts in which the narrators compared their experiences between Finland and their country of origin, talked about emotional and behavioural changes resulting from cultures meeting, attitudes towards and values they hold related to these changes, identity, home-sickness, feelings of belonging, adaptation, social support, stereotypes, attitudes of Finnish people, social relationships, discrimination, feeling of being an outsider, feeling of being at home, loneliness and language related topics such as language skills, use of language (Finnish and mother tongue) or learning Finnish.

## **4. Preliminary results**

Note for the reader: In the quotations I use below, square brackets [--] indicate that I have omitted a part of text. In the case of orally told stories words inside brackets [I have?] indicate that I am not certain if those were the exact words the narrator spoke. Any further information e.g. (laughter) I have included for the reader is put in normal brackets.

### **4.1 Theory-driven analysis: Acculturation talk**

#### **4.1.1 Comparisons between Finland and narrator’s country of origin**

Comparison between Finland and narrator’s country of origin is the most recurrent single acculturation related topic in my narrative data. Still, not everyone used this distinction to make sense of their life in Finland. Furthermore, in many cases the frequency of this kind of comparisons changed a lot from the first story to the follow-up story by the same narrator. Vladimir does not compare Finland or Finns to Russia (or former Soviet Union) or Russians in neither one of his stories. Anita on the other hand makes comparisons between Hungary or Hungarians and Finland and Finns several times in her first story, but not once in her second story.

In most cases the comparison is evaluative. Typically the issue being compared is linked with positive value either on the part of Finland or the country of origin. The latter presentation is usually found in the context of describing difficulties experienced in Finland.

In her second story, under a subtitle “Challenges and misunderstandings” Canadian Cecile writes about financial issues:

*Everyone worries about money and living alone in Finland is expensive! Living in Finland is... financially challenging. I find that my money goes a long way in Canada and I still miss the purchasing power I had at home.*

Peruvian Maria talks about the feelings of loneliness and responsibility in her follow-up story, describing a situation, in which she is having more responsibility at home compared to her busy husband, despite of her too being busy with her own work and extra work activities. She comes up with a following comparison between Peru and Finland:

*And, lately I've been thinking "what is this?". If I think myself in these same circumstances in Peru, we would have anyway a huge amount of people around us helping. There are... our family, so big. And there are many (laughter) ladies and men available to help. And... then also I would have ... to share, opportunity to share with them, so much, about my life, Every day, feelings and facts, and everything. [--]I am in Finland. It's great, I have learned a lot of things, good things, good values, good life for the children, good things. But I don't feel like [I have?] this warmness, that I, this human closeness with the people.*

Sometimes differences between the countries are seen as liberating. In her first story Anita comments in a humoristic tone on how living abroad enables her to act differently from others both in Finland and Hungary, her former home country:

*Well, I have had time to think! (laughter) Especially in this country, when you don't have to be so social and outgoing. In Hungary it really would be frowned upon if two people would sit in the same room without talking to each other. People would conclude that they are sulking or something. (laughter) Here it is possible. I find it extremely relaxing, not having to say anything, when I don't have anything to say. It is really convenient. I have already adopted some of these conventions and then in Hungary I sometimes face problems, like: -Well? -Well what? (laughter) I don't have anything to say. (laughter). I am not quite that fluent with the small talk anymore. Then again sometimes they say here: Yeah, she can never keep quiet. (laughter) [- -] They have accused me of talking too much. Well, I don't mind, I take it in good part. I say that I have a right to be talkative. (laughter). Like in both countries I have a good reason. In Hungary I have a good reason not to talk and in Finland I have a good reason to talk as much as I like. I find it very relaxing. I really, really enjoy living someplace else but home...*

Sometimes, instead of differences, similarities between two countries or nations are reported like in the following quotation of Cecile's first story:

*Finnish people and Canadians are actually quite similar - they love sports! Finnish people are also very patriotic and hate being called Swedish or Russian - it is the same as calling a Canadian an American.*

#### **4.1.2 Discrimination**

Discrimination is another common topic in my data. I coded a quotation with the code “discrimination”, whenever the narrator told or wrote about an event, practice or phenomenon, which she or he seems to consider to put him or her or any other foreigner in an unequal position compared to Finns, whether or not s/he defined the event as discriminatory him/herself. I also used a code “no discrimination” to mark quotations in which the narrator states s/he has *not* experienced discrimination.

Interestingly, participants seldom explicitly defined an event or practise as discriminatory, especially not on a personal level. This is how Vladimir in his first story writes about being called names and being an object of charity:

*I was called “ryssä”<sup>6</sup> only rarely and was often able to beat it either physically or taking advantage of the official way, teachers for example. What insulted me was so called charity and tolerance – donating old clothes and being told that yes, Finns fully accept me “even though I’m born in Russia” etc.*

In my data it is more common to state that one has *not* experienced discrimination than the other way round. In his first story Benjamin from Israel talks about his work place in regard to foreigners like this:

*They seem to be quite cautious on taking new employees (very flattering remembering the quickness of my integration), but do not discriminate on basis of race, age or sex.*

In a similar manner, Turkish Kemal comments the topic of discrimination in his first story:

*I did not experience any kind of discrimination regarding my ethnic origin in my professional career. For this, I appreciate the positive attitude of all the people involved with these activities.*

Straight after this comment he continues with a description which strongly suggests that outside his work place he is being treated in a discriminatory way often indeed, although he chooses to refer to these instances as “negative attitudes” and “prejudices” which lie behind those attitudes:

*However, this is just one side of the whole story. Everyday when I leave the office, I am basically hanging my professional identity on the wall. After this point, I am yet another foreigner. Who possibly does not have a job. Who basically wastes Finnish governmental resources and sucks the*

---

<sup>6</sup> Derogatory Finnish slang word used of Russians.

*Finnish taxpayers' hard-earned money. Who is incapable adapting to a modern society. Who must feel weak in a very homogenous society such as Finland, must be ashamed of her<sup>7</sup> country of origin and if this is not case, has to be reminded to do so in every possible occasion. Who is a clown, a foreign clown - ulkomaanpelle.<sup>8</sup>*

*I would like to emphasize an important point here. I believe that these negative attitudes I provocatively summarized in the last paragraph are consequences of prejudices. And prejudices evoke counter-prejudices: there is a possibility that a foreigner also builds similar prejudices towards Finns by such generalizations. I am aware that not everybody thinks about foreigners in these terms. This conclusion would be very unfair for my closest friends, my colleagues, or all the other people that I had a chance to represent myself as an individual rather than a foreigner. I am also aware that many individuals, institutions and organizations are working hard to change the current scenario. I appreciate their effort.*

Elsewhere, under the subtitle “Darkness and xenophobia”, Kemal briefly comments on episodes which sound like serious discrimination – even though he, again, does not use this word himself.

*I have experienced many cases that I felt that my identity as a foreigner was not a welcome. I can easily tell it from the stares of the people. Sometimes (mainly late night) verbal expressions add to the stares. Normally, I can easily control the situation. But in some occasions, the people who intend to give me (or any other foreigner) hard time, also work for publicity, that is, they manipulate the situation by stating expressions that the people around can easily hear. Mostly the publicity is in Finnish so I really loose the control. What strikes me in this is the attitude of the people around. Their silence, their bias towards their citizens, etc. And this starts a chain reaction. Attackers, who are pretty much aware of the silence, get harder and harder to control. In some of the events, the attacks went towards a serious crime, with considerable economical loss at my side.*

This style of reporting discrimination or racist attacks seems to be partly in line with the style Russian-Jewish immigrants talked about their anti-Semitism experiences in the study of Rapoport et al. (2002, 182):

*” - - the style used to present anti-Semitic experiences did not shape the other chapters in the immigration story. It was related with casual rhetoric in a journalistic reporting style and an offhand manner. These stories differed greatly from the manner in which the immigrants depicted events and experiences in the present, as well as how they talked about other events in their past. For instance, their flattening of emotional expression in the anti-Semitism story contrasted sharply with the loaded*

---

<sup>7</sup> Kemal’s original footnote: This is the solution I found to get rid of “his/her” form in English, my general third person singular is a “she”.

<sup>8</sup> A Finnish word, directly translated as “foreign clown”, sometimes used of foreigners in a belittling and slightly derogatory, although not hostile manner. (S. V.)

*expressive articulation used to represent offensive and degrading encounters with the indigenous - -”*

On the other hand, contrary to the participants of Rapoport and her colleagues’ study, Kemal does not use very “loaded expressive articulation” in any part of his story. His style is close to scientific or news journalistic style throughout the narrative, but the briefness and lack of details in this episode is striking compared to many other parts of Kemal’s story.

In my data, there is just one quotation where the writer, Anita from Hungary, in her first story explicitly defines a specific practise as discrimination herself:

*I also find it ridiculous, that EU-citizens receive their residence permit on a magnetic card. [- - ] I tired, I kind of asked the police if I could get it on a magnetic card, it would be a lot more handy. So they said that non-EU-citizens simply aren’t allowed it. That is also kind of different, I consider it discrimination.*

In a couple of stories the narrators express their hesitance or ambivalence in regard to interpreting a specific behaviour as discriminatory.

In her first story, talking about her former employer’s severe derelictions of duty towards her Anita says:

*Well, ok, I try to think that it is only like, that it is not common at all. And it is not, of course one should think that it is not discrimination, that it is not because I am a foreigner. But there is still, they have taken advantage of ... the fact that I don’t necessarily understand of know anything about the labour laws.*

Later she returns to the same issue:

*That is why I consider this pretty important, for example this work thing of mine, even though nobody would react, it is still simply one piece of information, one example, information package about what can possibly happen. [- -] Although it is not necessarily about discrimination...*

From the victim’s point of view it may not be all that desirable to define an experience of being treated unfairly as discriminatory. To me it looks like Kemal in the following quotation from his first story, is consciously trying to avoid having to draw on discrimination as the causal explanation of his “unpleasant experiences”.

*As a last minute addendum, I received an SMS from Anna, who is living in Paris now. Somebody tried to rob her flat there. She was telling that she feels pretty unsafe now. I tried to tell her that she should not take the case personally, rather it is easier to think that she is randomly chosen. The crime was towards her property, not towards her identity. I wish that I can also convince myself about this as well, regarding to my own unpleasant experiences.*

Maybe the need to feel in control of one's own life explains the unwillingness to call a specific instance as discrimination, because if it was discrimination, it is more likely to take place again compared to a purely random event. However, interpreting an experience of unequal treatment as purely random and not as discrimination, may be very difficult if the experiences seem to form a pattern like in Kemal's earlier description of the unwelcoming stares in which verbal attacks are added sometimes, and which on some occasions went toward a serious crime, as he writes.

## **4.2 Data driven analysis**

Within the data driven analysis I looked at the different themes found in the stories as well as the distinctions the narrators used to make sense of their lives. In this chapter I will discuss one of the key themes: family talk. I will also examine the use of geographical and social distinctions in the stories.

### **4.2.1 Key theme: Family talk**

Family talk increases considerably in every narrators' story from the first one to the follow-up story, which is not surprising as all 6 participants are now either married or cohabiting and most of them also have children, in contrast to the time of the first story, when Peruvian Maria was the only one of the participants already married with children and Hungarian Anita the only one cohabiting. Five of the participants now have a Finnish spouse or partner, Vladimir being an only one with an immigrant wife.

The key sub themes under the umbrella theme "family" are meeting a partner and establishing a relationship, narrator's own family, family of the spouse/partner and bringing up children in a bi- or multicultural environment and combining family and work life, some of which are discussed in the following.

#### **Partnership, in-laws and cultures meeting**

Narrators do not describe their partners at length. In the existing short descriptions similarities rather than differences between the couple are highlighted:

*We have a lot in common so it makes things easy for us (most of the time!).*

Cecile, follow-up story

*I hardly think of my wife in terms of the nationality. Living with her feels most natural; no culture shock whatsoever. The same is true both in Finland and in Turkey.*

Kemal, follow-up story

Kemal continues his previous comment by contemplating reasons for bicultural marriages breaking up:

*I have to admit that many mixed marriages around us broke down; cultural differences have been blamed on as the number-one reason for problems. Other reasons may include parental opposition and socio-economical difficulties.*

Maybe it is this general notion of cultural differences (and lack of parental support) being a risk for a successful partnership the narrators are targeting, when they emphasize similarities between their partner and themselves. It seems that parental approval is not taken for granted either, as many narrators also dedicate a chapter for this issue, describing their or their partner's acceptance of the relationship.

### **Bringing up children in a bi- or multicultural environment**

It is also often, but not always, through the parents or children even more so and not the partner, that the themes of adaptation and cultures meeting is discussed in the context of family.

One key dimension in the ways the participants discuss bringing up their children in Finland is maintaining and passing their own ethnic culture and language on their children. Maria makes up stories she tells her children to develop their Spanish skills and also to teach them things about her ethnic and personal background:

*- - their Spanish teacher told me "Hey, Maria, you have to read more Spanish to them [- -]". I decided I will tell the stories from my head. [- -] I would like to use my multicultural value in these histories. So I have invented a group of children. [- -] the stories started and they REALLY loved the stories because I mixed absolutely all that I've lived, all my imagination, [- -] and all the different places that exist.[- -] Persons who really exist and persons who existed are in the story. So when they go to Peru, they just recognise them.*

Anita mentions using Hungarian books and records to help her baby to grow up as bilingual. Kemal writes about books too:

*I speak Turkish to our daughter while my wife speaks Finnish. I must say that I enjoy a lot the ever-increasing Turkish children literature in Helsinki City library. I borrow books and read them to my daughter to retrieve the balance between the two languages she is exposed to.*

Bringing up children involves not just cherishing one's own culture but also taking a stance in regard to features of Finnish culture. This is how Anita comments on this side of a matter in her first story:

*- - for example, in my opinion though Finnish movies it is a lot easier to understand this drinking culture here, which foreigners moan about all the time. It is, I also find it disgusting, but I'm not interested, I think it is a*

*luxurious position in this country, to be able to say that it is not my business. It is not my problem. I don't have a problem like that and I hope that if I have children one day, I am able to bring them up a little bit outsiders as well. Or if they are that much of Finns, then they have a right for it and once again, I'm not that interested or then I will say that it is my man's duty, because he is the Finnish one of us here - -*

Kemal expresses worries about the possible discrimination his daughter might face later in her life:

*The idea that our daughter may experience discrimination/segregation during her life based on her multi-ethnic/multicultural background came into our minds once or twice, and it scared us. However, we trust ourselves and her to suppress this unpleasant thought, and our experience so far in group activities (swimming, music kindergarten, etc) are very positive.*

Family issues were also discussed unrelated to immigration and acculturation. Sometimes the family topic seems to replace the topic of acculturation to some extent when moving on to the follow-up story. This is how Anita sums up her current life:

*Yeah, life revolves around these issues and the main topic of the discussion in the evening is the poo of the dog and the child. [Laughter] So, things are very well, very well like this. [Laughter]*

#### **4.2.2 Distinctions (and parallels)**

In addition to paying attention to recurrent themes visible in my research data, identifying distinctions the participants use to make sense of their lives was an important step on my data-driven analysis.

#### **Geography and social groups – categories of belonging**

Narrators use a huge variety of individual distinctions to position themselves, to express identity and belonging. These distinctions are constructed using geographical and social categories.

In his first story Kemal describes his return to Finland after an earlier shorter, fixed-period stay here and explains the two different ways he uses the concept of “home”:

*I went back home, completed the necessary tasks, met my friends to say good-bye (this time it was harder, because my time of stay was not definite), came back here, [- -]. This instance started the second phase of my stay in Finland. In this phase, when I mention about my home*

*indicating where I stay, I refer to my current flat in Helsinki. On the other hand, when I mention about my conceptual home, I refer to Istanbul. Maybe in the third phase, these two different concepts will merge into a single entity. Maybe.*

Benjamin, too, writes about home, locating it to a kibbutz<sup>9</sup> as distinct from Israel:

*The first decision is moving out of the kibbutz. This is the hardest part as the kibbutz is my and my parents' home. [- - ] Deciding to move out of the kibbutz is much harder for me than deciding moving out of Israel.*

One might assume that geographical distinctions in immigrant stories would mainly consist of taxonomy of Finland and country of origin. However, Benjamin's distinction is not an only exception to this rule. This is how Cecile writes about "surprising things" in Finland, as she has titled the following paragraph in her first story:

*I am shocked with what I would call "a lack of manners" on the part of Finns In general. People push their way through crowds and on/off trains and/or buses. No one seems to say 'excuse me' and it is really bothersome. Perhaps that is because I was raised in a small town and living in the fast-paced capital region has been difficult to adjust to! If I could live anywhere In Finland I would live up in the far north! I would be very happy there!*

She begins the paragraph by employing a nation scale category "Finns", but moves on to make a distinction between Canadian small town and Finnish capital region, instead of comparing whole countries, when looking for an explanation for the behaviour she has observed.

### **Categories of social groups**

In the rest of the data too, the narrators employ different social categories in a very flexible and creative way, drawing lines to exclude and include groups of people and to express and negotiate their identity.

Verkuyten (2005, 152) notes that from the space of liminality or "in-betweenness" "it is possible to interrogate, to challenge, to unsettle and to intervene tactically in the dominant discourses and categorical constructions".

Turks in Finland face relatively strong prejudices from the side of Finns. Especially in his first story Kemal is recounting several personal examples of being target of these prejudices and stereotypes. One instance of this took place during a movie festival in Helsinki.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kibbutz is an Israeli collective intentional community (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kibbutz>).

*I think we managed to shock some other festival followers we met by being Turkish, but still going to the "cultural" movies. I believe that in many people's mind we were considered as exceptions rather than rules.*

A life story written for the purposes of an immigrant research may act as a forum for putting the record straight and correcting some faulty images. In the following quotation Kemal is offering the reader a varied representation of Turks using social categories in a flexible and versatile manner:

*This is related to the variance. I do not claim that the whole population of Istanbul, which is more than 12 millions, are enthusiastic followers of all the cultural events taking place there. [- -] On the other hand, there is another group having very similar lifestyles or resources with the people from other European countries. I think their percentage is about the quarter of the whole population, and rising. The main issue that I am trying to point out here is the big variance among people in my country. This variance is not very straightforward to understand for European citizens, especially for those from Nordic welfare states.*

Kemal starts by making a life style based distinction on the local level, among the people living in Istanbul and, with a help of that distinction he then constructs a common ingroup embracing Turkey as part of Europe, on an international level. On the other hand, when he in the end talks about European citizens this seems to exclude Turks. In the same sentence he also makes a further distinctions between European citizens based on the part of Europe they come from.

In addition to facing stereotypes and prejudice, the immigration experience sometimes seems to put the immigrant in a position where she or he starts to question the content and limits of his /her own ingroup. In the story of Peruvian Maria, and her first story in particular, Maria has defined herself as Latin American several times. Latin America and Latin Americans thus create an important and salient social category in her story. Here Maria describes the time she spent working in Honduras and how the Hondurians, despite of being Latin American, did not claim her expectations:

*I thought I was going to be very happy in Honduras, because it's another Latin American country. The work was very interesting [- -] I had lots of friends there, but culturally there were a lot of differences between South American culture and Central American culture. I didn't trust very much the Hondurians people, because of the history background. They lie very much easily. I realized that and I understand [that] because they have lots of very bad experience during two centuries already. [- -] All my friends, most of my good friends were Finns, and also very few Hondurians people. I thought that it will be different because I need Latin American friends.*

Later on, when back in Finland, Maria moved from the metropolitan area to a smaller town with her family. In her story she draws a parallel between the Latin Americans and people in Lappeenranta. Thus, quite surprisingly, it was in the small Finnish town of Lappeenranta that she found the ease of socialising she was missing and which she had connected with Latin American people and culture but failed to find in Honduras.

*I realized what made me a little bit more open. Because in Lappeenranta people were more similar than Latin Americans. I felt more comfortable with these people in Lappeenranta. I talked with everybody at the supermarket... I got lots of, not friends, but when I went to the super market, I talked with the cashier, I talked with the one who was in suutari<sup>10</sup>, with everybody. So, such a small town. Everybody knew "Maria the Peruvian" who was always smiling! And talk, it was so easy to talk with those people. And Jyrki's work was also nice. And the environment there was very friendly, nice. Also because in Lappeenranta they have lots of time. And so, we had lots of parties and meetings and nice things together with the other families. So it was a nice time.*

Even later in her first story Maria talks about her relationships with other people and attributes her behaviour to her individual character or being, distancing the feature from her cultural or social background:

*And lately, I have noticed that [- -] because of my openness, it is very easy to speak with the people. It's for me very easy to go there and discuss with all [- -] they are very relaxed with me, because I'm so relaxed, in a way. It's not because I'm Latin American, but that's my way.*

I haven't yet had a chance to examine in detail the various ways the participants use social categories and what is actually being done by them. But already at this early stage I am surprised by the wide range of distinctions the narrators use to position themselves and to express their identities and personalities. Although many of the stories contain comparisons between Finland and the country of origin, this talk has typically certain objectivity in its tone, and the participants seemed to be more likely to use the above referred individual distinctions, rather than the dimension of Finland – country of origin to position themselves as immigrants and unique human beings.

## **5. Discussion: Comparing and combining the approaches**

In my data, all six participants discussed both family and acculturation related topics in both of their stories, one way or the other. As indicated above, also the increase of family talk from the first story to the follow-up story was a common trend in all stories. At the same time, there was a great overall variety to be found in many respects, both between different writers' stories as well as one writer's two stories.

Acculturation does not seem to be an equally central theme for all participants even in the first story, but the variety gets even bigger in the later stories when we look how often and how the participants talk about acculturation and what it seems to mean to them. In the stories of Hungarian Anita and Turkish Kemal the amount and salience of acculturation talk decreased dramatically from the first story to the second. In these follow-up stories of the two participants family becomes one of the key themes, which

---

<sup>10</sup> Fin. = shoe maker. (S. V.)

appears understandable in respect that both Kemal and Anita are fresh parents.<sup>11</sup> In Maria's story on the other hand, acculturation related speech in the second story seems to become increasingly more important compared to the first story. However, this development isn't taking place in opposition to family talk as also the amount of family talk is increasing. So, despite of family and acculturation talk sometimes appearing to mutually exclude each other to some extent, this is not always the case. Sometimes it may be family issues in particular that trigger the acculturation related thinking. Having and raising children make the questions of choice of language used in the family and the maintenance of one's own cultural traditions topical once again.

Examining immigrant life stories may shed light on the interesting influences between acculturation and rest of the life and especially on the way the narrators them selves make sense of this dynamics. As Pick (1997) states in her commentary on Berry's acculturation article (1997), to enhance the study of adaptation and acculturation process, the researchers should consider immigrants as social actors, who "live and interpret their own reality". Using life story data as research material contributes to this objective.

Life story data does of course have its limitations too. Overall, a researcher taking a social constructionist standpoint to language can not make comprehensive diagnostic conclusions about the phase or state of narrator's acculturation. The strengths of life story research lies elsewhere. By studying autobiographical narratives of immigrants one can examine the ways immigrants interpret their acculturation experiences and how they use social categories and other distinctions to make sense of and articulate their lives. While some of these constructions don't appear to relate to acculturation process, others seem to be fairly tightly linked with it, but might not be accounted for by traditional acculturation research, conducted by using questionnaires only.

This kind of immigrant research combining data-driven (narrative) biographical approach and theory-driven acculturation framework draws one's attention to the problematic nature of the concept of acculturation. As a theoretical concept it is a vague one and has been used in such varied meanings in different contexts, that loosely defined, almost all changes an immigrant faces in a new country could be linked to acculturation, one way or the other. As such, the concept of acculturation refers to everything and nothing.

Defining and separating the different dimensions of acculturation may, paradoxically enough be necessary for reaching a more cohesive understanding on acculturation within the research field (Nguyen et al., 1999, Liebkind 2001). Furthermore, observing and noticing the details and individual differences related to immigration is important in order to develop acculturation theories even more feasible (Lazarus 1997, 41 - 43).

Within acculturation research, social relations, behaviour, attitudes and identity are usually examined and measured on the dimensions of two cultures or ethnic groups, typically on the level of society of origin and society of settlement. The short analysis of the six stories of my data shows that despite of most of the narrators employing this

---

<sup>11</sup> The fact that I have left out the word "adaptation" from the lengthy instructions for narrating one's story, could of course play a role here. It is possible that without mentioning adaptation in the first instructions these participants might have talked less about that already in their first stories.

dualistic dimension, it is by no means the only important one. Other central dichotomies for these narrators were kibbutz – Israel, small town – metropolitan area, work – private life. On the individual level, important juxtapositions and interdependence – also from the acculturational point of view – may be constructed on the individual – environment –dimension, like when Maria presented her openness as her individual, not cultural or ethnic quality.

Moreover, the data-driven approach enables identifying individually important and essential social groups outside the dichotomy of two cultures. For Maria, the geographically loose group of Latin Americans, seems to be an important group of identification. It may be necessary to look at these individually meaningful social groups and networks in addition to ethnic and cultural dichotomies, not only to examine how immigrants make sense of their lives, but also to develop more profound understanding of acculturation process. In addition to ethnic groups, other groups of identification may also provide the individual an important source of know-how and social support and hence contribute to the result of acculturation.

Acculturation and related experiences do not make a distinct strand, but are woven together with the rest of the material of an immigrant's life story, making an intricate whole. Therefore, in my opinion, acculturation too, is best examined as part of the life course of an individual, taking into account his/her own ways of making sense of his/her life. I believe that the dual approach I have used in my research opens up new standpoints to immigrant lives and also encourages us to examine critically the essence and operationalization of acculturation within the ever expanding field of acculturation research.

## Sources

- Berry, J. W. (1990). Psychology of acculturation. In J. J. Berman (Eds.): Cross-cultural perspectives. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1989, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 201–234.
- Berry, J. W. (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International Migration*, 30, 69–85.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34.
- Berry, J.W. (2002). Conceptual Approches to Acculturation. In K.M. Chun – P.B. Organista – G. Marín (Eds.): *Acculturation. Advances in theory, measurement and applied research*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 17–37.
- Berry, J.W., Kim, U., Minde, T. & Mok, D. (1987). Comparative studies of acculturative stress. *International Migration Review*, 21(3), 491–511.
- Berry, J.W., Poortinga, Y.H., Segall, M.H. & Dasen, P.R. (1992). *Cross-cultural psychology: Research and applications*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fakundiny, L. (2001). Autobiography and the Essay. In M. Jolly (Eds.): *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 79–81.
- Hanne, M. (2001). Narrative. In M. Jolly (Eds.): *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 633–635.
- Huttunen, L. (2002). Kotona, maanpaossa, matkalla. Kodin merkitykset maahanmuuttajien omaelämäkerroissa. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- Hänninen, V. (1991). Työpaikan menetys tarinana. *Psykologia* 26, 348–355.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, I. (2000). Psychological Acculturation and Adaptation among Russian-Speaking Immigrant Adolescents in Finland. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalipsykologian laitos.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, I. & Liebkind, K. (1997). Maahanmuuttajien sopeutuminen pääkaupunkiseudulla. *Sosiaalipsykologinen näkökulma*. Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskuksen tutkimuksia 1997:9.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, I. & Liebkind, K. (2001). Perceived discrimination and psychological adjustment among Russian-speaking immigrant adolescents in Finland. *International Journal of Psychology*, 36, 174–185.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., Liebkind, K. & Vesala, T. (2002). Rasismi ja syrjintä Suomessa. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., Liebkind, K., Horenczyk, G. & Schmitz, P. (2003). The interactive nature of acculturation: Perceived discrimination, acculturation attitudes

and stress among young ethnic repatriates in Finland, Israel and Germany. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 79–97.

Lazarus, R. S. (1997). Acculturation isn't everything. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 39–43.

Liebkind, K. (2001). Acculturation. In S. Brown & S. Gaertner (Eds.): *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*. Oxford: Blackwell, 386–406.

Liebkind, K., Mannila, S., Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., Jaakkola, M., Kyntäjä, E., & Reuter, A. (2004). *Venäläinen, virolainen, suomalainen. Kolmen maahanmuuttajaryhmän kotoutuminen Suomeen*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Lomsky-Feder, E. & Rapoport, T. (2000). Visit, Separation, and Deconstructing Nostalgia: Russian Students Travel to Their Old Home. *Contemporary Ethnography* 29(1), 32–58.

Nguyen, H. H., Messé, L. A., & Stollak, G. E. (1999) Toward a more complex understanding of acculturation and adjustment. Cultural involvements and psychosocial functioning in Vietnamese youth. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 30(1), 5–31.

Perhoniemi, R. & Jasinskaja-Lahti, I. (2006). *Maahanmuuttajien kotoutuminen pääkaupunkiseudulla. Seurantatutkimus vuosilta 1997 – 2004*. Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus.

Pick, S. (1997). Berry in Legoland. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 49–71.

Rapoport, T., Lomsky-Feder, E. & Heider, A. (2002). Recollection and Relocation in Immigration: Russian-Jewish Immigrants “Normalize” Their Anti-Semitic Experiences. *Symbolic interaction* 25, 175–198.

Redfield, R., Linton, R. & Herskovits, M. (1936). Memorandum on the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38, 149–152. Referred to in K. Liebkind (2001). Acculturation. In: S. Brown & S. Gaertner (Eds.): *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*. Oxford: Blackwell, 386–406.

Searle, W. & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and socio-cultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 449–464

Verkuyten, Maykel (2005.) *The social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*  
Hove: Psychology Press

Ward, C. (1996). Acculturation. In D. Landis & R. S. Bhagat (Eds.): *Handbook of intercultural training* (2. painos). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 124–147.

Wikipedia (2006). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kibbutz>. (Read 6.11.2006.)