

# Cohort and generational effects of cultural retention of Finnish Canadians in Manitoba



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For Finnish immigrants to North America it is possible to assimilate into the dominant culture, and yet some choose cultural retention, often across three generations. In this study we conducted semi-structured interviews with Finnish Canadians, concentrating on cultural assimilation and retention. We sought to separate generational from cohort effects, and results showed that cultural retention was strongest among people who immigrated as adults with intact family units.

## Review of literature

### *Theoretical perspectives*

Finnish immigration to North America has been occurring over 500 years, but systematic study of

their processes of adaptation to their new environment is sparse. Theoretically, a symbolic interactionist approach suggests that language, religion, and family rituals are ways of interpreting cultural heritage (La Rossa & Reitzes 1993). Individuals learn from family members, from teachers, and from other people in the culture to form their own individual and/or group identity. Furthermore, a human ecological approach (Bubolz & Sontag 1993; Kieren, Vaines & Badir 1984) suggests the importance of the near environment on family interaction. The ways that homes are constructed, the type of decoration within them, the cultural aspects of food and clothing, and the language spoken at home are all parts of the near environment which are important to this research.

Empirical research on immigrants suggests that they make adaptations, drop certain practices, or incorporate new ones suited to life in the new country (Szekely 1990). These behaviors can be means of enhancing integration and well-being in their new country (Heinonen 1996; Nyakabwa & Harvey 1990).

The study of Finnish family patterns in Finland is extensive (cf.

Harvey, Bond, Laitinen & Sommer 1994; Tolkki-Nikkonen 1996). Study of family patterns among Finns in North America is sparse, as much of the scholarly work has been done from a historical perspective, utilizing archival methods (cf. Lindström 1992; Niemi 1998) or by examining a particular cultural artifact, such as the sauna (Sutyla 1977). Our research, utilizing symbolic interactionist and ecosystem approaches, is different from the usual historical approach taken by other researchers of Finns in North America.

Analysis for this paper was influenced by the work of Roos (1981), who studied cohort and generational effects of Finns in Finland. He showed that successive migration from the countryside to cities in Finland in its rather late industrialization (after World War II) affected value orientations and opportunities for Finnish cohorts. Sintonen (1992, 77) calls Roos' way-of-life research one which is formulated using a life history approach, wherein informants give a "chronological account of the important matters of a person." Tolkki-Nikkonen (1996, 667) says, "At a theoretical level, a central concern [of Roos] was to establish the place of way-of-life

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among categories of historical materialism from the vantage point of the social division of labor." Later works have used daily life as a focus, something that the Finnish sociologist Engeström (1990) has called activity theory. He concentrates on daily life, researching such things as standing in line for tickets or meeting friends for coffee.

A synthesis of Engeström's (1990) work with human ecological theory has been done by Finnish researchers Tuomi-Gröhn and Palojoki (2000, 113). Their focus is on human action in households, emphasizing the "situated nature of everyday human action in households." Thus the context in which the activity occurs has a great deal to do with what people do, think, and feel. The context affects the actor to such an extent that action may appear to be irrational or inefficient. In order to explain human action, then, one must ask informants what things mean to them and why certain behaviors are done (Tuomi-Gröhn & Palojoki 2000).

Sintonen (1992) was also influenced by Roos' way-of-life research. Sintonen studied Finns in Canada who had immigrated in the 1920s, employing a life course analysis of their experiences. The life histories of his respondents showed a close connection between interaction networks and language preferences. He characterized the respondents as having "fragmented ethnicity" (Sintonen 1992, 87), wherein at some times they interacted almost entirely in the Finnish community and at others reported weak ties to it.

In this research we used semi-structured interviews with a con-

venience sample of 22 Finnish Canadians. The theoretical work of symbolic interactionists and human ecological theorists influenced the development of questions asked. In the analysis of data for this paper a way-of-life approach, concentrating on daily activity and its meaning, was used.

### *Immigrant research*

Many immigrant families experience stress due to lack of fluency in language of the new country (Thomas 1995). Finnish immigrants before 1960 generally could not speak English or French at all when they arrived in Canada (Sintonen 1993). Later immigrants had the opportunity to learn English in Finland, although not all did so. Children are often the first to learn the new language, and they often act as family gate-keepers, interpreting for physicians, bureaucrats, and teachers (Thomas 1995).

In early stages of Finnish migration to North America men and women worked in sex-segregated occupations. Men worked in mining, logging, and farming, where they often worked in groups and spoke Finnish. Women, on the other hand, worked with families as domestics or in boarding houses as cooks or cleaners, and they were forced to learn English more quickly than the men (Sintonen 1992).

Occupational deflection (Thomas 1995) is commonly observed in immigrant populations. Unable to transfer their technical or professional skills to the new country, due to restrictive licensing requirements, they have to take lower paying and lower status jobs. Some occupational deflection was

felt by Finns, but it was not the case for all. The post-1950's group was generally married, skilled at a trade, and upwardly mobile (Sutyla 1977, 97). He reports that by the 1970's "many of these Finns are securely middle class, they own their own homes, their children are grown up and married, and by Canadian standards 'they have made it.'"

### *Finnish immigration*

Many of the Finns who came to North America came first to the United States. Secondary migration to Canada then occurred, in times when the Canadians accepted people from the United States quite willingly (Sutyla 1977). Finns from the Ostrobothnia area of Western Finland came in great waves from 1910 to 1980, both to the United States and to Canada (Niemi 1988).

While Finnish immigrants to other parts of Canada have been studied to a certain extent, little literature is available for the Canadian Prairies. Lindström states, "The prairie provinces of Alberta and Manitoba have scarcely been touched" (1997, 35) by academic researchers. Ramo's work (1975) outlines the involvement of Finnish immigrants in some areas of Canada, following church organizations and labor groups. He also gives a brief discussion about Saskatchewan's settlement called New Finland, but Manitoba is largely missing there too. The sole paragraph referring to Winnipeg states that in 1933 the number of Finns in Winnipeg was between 150-200, and in Elma, Manitoba it was 150 (Ramo 1975, 282).

Finnish immigration to Manitoba, like other parts of Canada, has been characterized by waves of arrivals. One wave occurred around 1900, another during the late Finnish Civil War, and another after World War II (Niemi 1988). Most Finns in Manitoba were engaged in mining, particularly in the towns of Flin Flon and The Pas, or in farming, settling near Elma and Lac du Bonnet. Others were drawn to the main population area of the province, the city of Winnipeg, for various reasons, including professional employment in education, sport or private business. Current Finnish immigrants and their descendants in Manitoba are estimated at 1,500, extrapolated from census figures cited by Eklund (1987,24).

It is important to note whether or not people choose to adapt and integrate into the dominant culture. In the case of Finns, sharing race and religious values with the dominant culture means that they can assimilate if they want, particularly after a generation or two in Canada. The symbolic interpretation of their heritage is thus important to study.

### ***Problem statement***

For this paper the research problem investigated was as follows: "What are the effects of cohorts (people who immigrated at the same time) versus generation (people who immigrated as children in comparison to those who came as adults) in cultural adaptation and continuity? Did early immigrants retain more of the Finnish culture than later ones? Did people who immigrated as children join

the Canadian mainstream more often than their adult counterparts?

## **Research methodology**

### ***Interview exploration of cultural retention***

Research on immigrant populations had been done by both researchers (see Copeland & Harvey 1984; Heinonen 1996). In addition both researchers are of Finnish descent, with Heinonen immigrating with her family from Finland to Canada when she was 5 years old, and Harvey's grandparents coming to North America from Finland in the early 1900's. Both work at the University of Manitoba, but they met at the Finnish-Canadian Club.

The Finnish-Canadian Club was interested in documenting the experiences of their members and others in the Finnish community, and they provided a list of their members and some modest financial support for the project. The Health, Leisure, and Human Performance Research Institute of the University of Manitoba provided the bulk of the funds, indicating interest in cultural retention, particularly in leisure and sport activity of the immigrants. (See Heinonen & Harvey 2002 for a description and analysis of Finnish Manitoba leisure and sport activity.)

Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions in a qualitative interview for this research. A particular focus which is relevant to this paper relates to the retention of Finnish culture. Respondents were asked about speaking Finnish at home, their participation in the Finnish-Canadian Club, their writing or

speaking about their Finnish homeland, and travel to Finland. They were also asked if they had Finnish visitors in their homes in Canada. (See Heinonen and Harvey 2001 for analysis on the meaning of home for these respondents.) Interviewers tried to elicit a change in any of these activities over time, asking if, for example, participation in the Finnish-Canadian Club was as frequent now as when they immigrated.

### ***Data collection***

Respondents were initially recruited by snowball sampling of the members of the Finnish-Canadian Club. Then, as people were interviewed, they were asked to suggest other Finnish Manitobans who could be contacted. Letters of introduction were sent to potential respondents, explaining the research and its purposes. Bilingual Finnish/English interviewers (3) were trained, as well as three English-only interviewers. A telephone screening determined which language was preferable. Respondents were interviewed mostly in their own homes.

Interviewers arranged the interview date and place over the telephone; before starting the interview, ethical considerations were explained. Respondents signed an ethical release form. Some respondents wished to have their names and participation in the study confidential; others gave permission to use their names and their interview for use by the Finnish Canadian Club.

All responses were audiotaped, transcribed, and returned to respondents for checking. Finnish

language tapes were translated by Heinonen. Analysis by themes was done by the researchers, using standard techniques for text-based information (Padgett 1998).

### *Description of participants*

There were 22 participants in this research, ranging in age from early 30's to late 80's. Seven were men, and fifteen were women. They immigrated to Canada from years 1920 (n = 1), 1940's (n = 1), 1950's (n = 9), 1960's (n = 7), to 1970's (n = 4); thus three quarters of our participants came in the 1950's or 1960's. Five came alone; 17 came with family members (n for spouse = 5, n for spouse and children = 6, n for parents and siblings = 6). Immigration during childhood occurred for six participants. Most came directly to Manitoba, but some came first to other provinces and one came from the United States.

Our participants were also interconnected. Four were members of one family; there were also three husband-wife pairs interviewed. Thus sixteen family groups were represented among the participants. We did not ask for income figures, but, judging from the types of homes in which they lived, all had achieved middle-class status in Canada.

## **Results**

### *Cohort effects on cultural retention*

Respondents who came to Canada during a time when many other Finns were immigrating had ample opportunity to retain their culture. People who came alone, particular-

ly ones who came when few others were immigrating, had less chance to speak Finnish or enter into Finnish celebrations.

### *Impressions at arrival*

Chances of meeting other Finns were greater for the 1950's and 1960's immigrants than for other cohorts. For example, one couple, arriving by train in the 1950's to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan said

*We were at the railway station buying newspaper, and we talking Finnish and there was a couple of ladies—they start talking Finnish too. [My wife] started walking away and I say, 'Hey, hey. Don't walk away now. We have to talking those people are Finns.'*

Although his wife protested that it was not proper to speak to strangers, the husband prevailed. The couple received help right away from the Finns, including assistance finding housing.

Another couple immigrated in 1951 with their children and some friends. Our respondent said

*Another couple came with. We were friends, and we always decided that we, you know, that someday we'll go someplace and then we saw the ad in the paper that now you can emigrate to Canada."*

Experiences of others were not so smooth. One said that they came to Winnipeg and were put in an immigration hall, a building that has since been torn down.

*That's where they put us. All the immigrants and the family got one room to stay in. There was a struggle... We got a small room... There were many, not*

*Finnish people, but Europeans... We were there for 6 weeks... There was food. Then there was a kitchen. There we could make coffee then. Finnish coffee. And if you left it there, it disappeared. Your coffee cups, dish cloths and everything disappeared. The children got the mumps. Other children had it and it spread.*

Another said,

*When we came to Winnipeg, it was quite dismal. It was winter. February 1, at nine o'clock at night. It was very cold and Ness Avenue was very, very dismal looking. I got a very poor impression.*

Many found Canada backward. The were used to a Finland rebuilt after World War II in the latest style, and architecture and consumer items were not as up to date in Canada.

*When we came to Canada, they didn't have winter boots... Snow is there a metre high and people are in their high heels... I couldn't believe it. I had beautiful leather boots. Everybody said, 'Where did you get those?' I couldn't understand that they didn't have.*

### *Cultural retention in the early stages of immigration*

The Finn Club was helpful to new immigrants. It was especially active during the '50's and '60's. The Club hosted coffee parties, put on plays, had exercise classes, and held dances, sometimes with live music. Recalling those times respondents said

*I found friends that way. . .it was that it helped to get acqu-*

*ainted with other Scandinavians...*

*Well, those early years there was always some kind acting and they got little plays and whatever, singing and dancing.... I did that in Finland... It's like the Finnish National Dancers. All the dances and then order some material from Finland for the plays.*

Members of the Club also wrote plays themselves. One respondent remembers typing them with two fingers, after she came home from work, and later putting them on stage.

Families were able to eat Finnish food that they made themselves, and part of the Finn Club's activities included traditional foods. Finnish language could be retained at the Club, and Finnish celebrations such as Midsummer, Little Christmas, and Easter were also held.

Later cohorts, especially people who came alone, found the Club did not occupy such an important position for them. These people already knew English, and some came to Canada with a job waiting for them. For example, one who came in 1971 enjoyed meeting people at the Club, but it did not form a focus for him. He said

*I got to know quite a few Finns... [In the Club] what I have done is very little... It is kind of neat how they get to meet in a place and they have something in common...*

### **Cultural retention during the middle stages of migration**

Research with a way-of-life focus has found that as people move

through the life cycle, they have different interaction patterns with other immigrants (Sintonen 1992). After the initial phase of learning the language, getting a job, and spending time with other immigrants, people tend to move to acquiring material possessions, such as a home and a car. The 1950's and 1960's immigrants in our study tended to also have a spouse and young children, so they had less time for visits with other Finns. People recalled acquiring consumer goods. One couple reminisced about their first car, saying

*A '52 Plymouth. It was a full size car... It had a sun visor outside it.*

Acquisition of material goods seemed to be taken for granted by later cohorts, and people commented less about getting a home or a car.

### **Cultural retention in the late stages of migration**

As people lived in Canada longer, they had less need for the Finn Club and interaction with other immigrants. One said

*Your home is here. Got family here, got kids and grandchildren, everything here...*

When the interviewer queried about the importance of having Finnish friends, one couple who had been in Canada a long time said,

*Not necessarily [important to have Finnish friends]. It's nice to have them definitely.*

Couples who immigrated together still spoke Finnish at home to each other, but their offspring all married Canadians, and their grandchildren generally did not speak

Finnish. One lamented that she never spoke Finnish but her English was not good either, saying

*I have a very, very strong accent in my Finnish language now. It take a long time for me to speak Finnish until I finally am able to speak fluently. Isn't that awful? You don't know English, but you've lost your mother tongue too.*

Many of the 1950's and 1960's immigrants built their own homes or cottages. In them they built a sauna, a Finnish style bath which has great cultural significance.

*I built that as soon as we bought the houses.*

*I am building a sauna in my condominium now. I've converted most of my friends to enjoying the sauna now.*

### **Generational effects on cultural retention**

*Initial experiences of school* People who came to Canada as children had different experiences from their parents. For one thing, they had to go to Canadian schools, often starting that experience with no knowledge of English. These adults recalled the pain of being thrust into a different school environment.

*Being, you know, typically Finnish. Being very painfully shy, it took me probably two years to really be comfortable speaking out loud or even reading out loud...*

For others school was a great adventure.

*We played with other kids and you learn how to say one thing and you use sign language... Also reading comic books is a*

*great way to learn English... My sister and I... would sit on the floor with a dictionary going through comic books...*

### ***Middle and late phases of cultural retention by generation***

Most of the people who immigrated as children married Canadians. Thus they did not speak Finnish at home, nor did they generally have such an active involvement with the Finnish Canadian Club.

*My oldest one, she is 16. She speaks Finnish quite well. . . My son is 12 and he struggles with Finnish. . . I have a seven year old daughter who absolutely refuses to speak Finnish.*

On the other hand, some Canadians who married Finns adapted to Finnish customs and activities, learning Finnish, attending Finn Club activities or visiting Finland.

While being proud of their Finnish heritage, later cohorts were less likely to visit Finland as often as their parents did. They saw their family roots in Canada, and they had uses for their money other than travel to Finland.

### ***Cultural retention by all cohorts***

Examining the near environment of the human ecosystem of these immigrants showed cultural retention by use of artifacts in the home. No cohort differences were observed in the use of Finnish artifacts. All of the respondents had Finnish things in their homes, including glassware and textiles. Many had Finnish-made jewelry, and some had Finnish clothing. Since many Finnish-made things are available, some ordered things

from Finland via the Internet or from Finnish shops in Thunder Bay Ontario. Others received gifts from Finnish relatives, and still others traveled and bought things for their homes while in Finland. People said

*It's a big thing for me that I have something which is Finnish.*

*I'm proud of these things, and I do have some pride in displaying them.*

*Decidedly important because it keeps in mind one's Finnishness. One doesn't need to be ashamed of being Finnish.*

## **Discussion and implications**

These Finnish immigrants to Canada did report the importance of language and interaction with Finns in the early stages of immigration, as predicted by symbolic interaction theory and way-of-life research. Like what Sintonen (1992) found among 1920's immigrants to Canada from Finland, we found cultural retention different as people moved along the life cycle. Language was more an issue for people early in their immigration, but generational effects were noticed, with adult immigrants continuing to speak English with less ease than those who came as children. Cohort effects, particularly the interaction with other Finns, were also observed. Finally the near environment provided an opportunity for Finns to retain cultural identity, regardless of cohort or generation. These respondents had Finnish artifacts in their homes, built Finnish style sauna

and cottages, traveled to and from Finland, and read Finnish books and magazines.

This study has some limitations. In the first place, we have a small convenience sample, and thus generalization to other Finnish immigrants to Canada is impossible. Second, recall of events at immigration may be somewhat hazy. Third, interviewing people at one point in time may mean that they emphasize some aspects of their immigration experiences and neglect others.

The study has some implications for practitioners. When social service providers and educators work with immigrant families who blend into the dominant society, they may minimize or be unaware of some of the struggles families had or are having. It is important for professionals to be sensitive to the symbolic meaning of events, recognizing that interpretation is through a cultural lens. Further, knowledge of the near environment can expand understanding of client families. Finally, recognition of the stages through which immigrants go in their host country can assist practitioners to plan relevant and appropriate activities and learning experiences for them.

## **Abstract**

This study is of Finnish immigrants' cultural retention and adaptation to Manitoba, Canada. Using the perspectives of symbolic interaction and human ecosystem, 22 respondents were interviewed. Theme analysis of qualitative results showed cultural retention was stronger among people who

immigrated as adults (generational effect), while cultural adaptation was strongest among those who

married Canadians and/or came to Canada as children (cohort effect). Cultural retention was strongest

among people who immigrated as adults with intact family units.

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