Ethnic Symbols: Their Role in Maintaining and Constructing Finnish American Culture

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This study examines the role that symbols play in the maintenance and construction of Finnish American culture. A "Symbols of Finnishness" scale was developed to determine what symbols were important, not important, controversial, and unknown to group members. The subjects (n= 134) were Finnish Americans living in the Northern Midwest United States. A typical respondent was 61 years old, retired and living in rural Minnesota, U.S.A., being of low to middle income, with equal percentages of respondents having a high-school or college education. This sample included more women than men (63% vs. 36%). Two issues discussed are the construction of ethnic culture and positive distinctiveness in the projection of ethnic stereotypes. This report is part of a larger study published by the University of Joensuu's publications in the Social Sciences.

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A Brief History of the Finnish Americans in the Upper Midwest

The Finnish Americans living in the Upper Midwest U.S.A. are a special group. This group has an American tradition which is very different from other White ethnic groups living in the Upper Midwest. While comparing this group with other White ethnic groups can be beneficial in itself, this study prides itself in providing a more detailed and fresh look at this group as it exists today.

In order to better understand Finnish American ethnicity one must know something about the group. Many Finns began leaving Finland with hopes of establishing themselves in the United States. Some of the issues which propagated this emigration included a growing landless working class, lack of social mobility, and famine. With the hope of a better life, many of these Finnish Americans came to the upper Midwest of the United States (Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan).

Finnish American Culture

At its highpoint Finnish American cultural life could be divided into the areas of fraternal organizations (temperance movement), consumer Co-ops, radical political organizations, and the church (Kivisto 1989; Kolehmainen & Hill 1951; Ross 1978). These institutions were important to the Finnish Americans because they helped maintain ties to the old world while easing entry into the new (Krats 1988).

Since Finnish immigrants tended to be Lutheran, one of the cultural elements of the Finnish Americans was the Finnish Lutheran Church. Another major cultural element of the Finnish Americans was the Finnish Worker's clubs. These clubs included the Finnish Socialist Federation (Suomalainen Sosialisti Järjestö) as well as the Finnish Worker's Party. The Finnish Socialist Federation was a class-conscious national organization which fought for better conditions in the mines and higher wages for miners, which many Finns

were (Karni 1975). The Finnish Co-op movement was another important aspect of Finnish American history. These Co-ops arose during times of strike and provided many services to the community, for example providing credit to individuals who could not otherwise get it. Some of the Co-ops included creameries, boarding houses, and feed and flour terminals (Kivisto 1989).

In terms of the Finnish American's family life, in the book "Se Tie" Alice Niemi Murphy (1981) documents personal accounts from Finnish Americans who tell of life in Finnish Minnesota. She writes about the pressure which was felt by school children to give up Finnish language and customs in favor of American ways. This issue of giving up Finnish ways in favor of becoming American is echoed often by Finns. Another theme of the Finnish American family is the celebrating of Finnish holidays such as Laskiainen and Juhannus. These celebrations were ways which families retained the cultural traditions of their past (Murphy 1981).

Downfall of the Finnish American Front

As time went on, many of the Finnish American institutions lost vitality in the American environment. By 1925 there were several polarizations within the Finnish American community which lead to the group's institutional decline. These changes brought many organizations into a more mainstream, less ethnic position within society (Karni, Kaups & Ollila 1975). Today, the institutions which once were the foundations of Finnish American life have certainly fallen. The Co-op society has become non-political, the temperance societies have folded, and the Finnish Workers Federation has become non-existent. Additionally, on a personal level, over time the decrease of Finnish native-born Finns spelled change for not only the group's language but the culture itself (Ross 1978). Through the process of assimilation the importance of one's Finnish identity seems to have become less important to many Finnish Americans.

During the 1960's European Americans experienced an upsurgence of ethnic pride (Kivisto 1989). During this period a number of Finnish symbols came to represent the group. Eleanor Palo Stoller (1996) has noted the items sauna, sisu, and Sibelius as strong symbols of Finnish American culture. This article's aim is to shed light on other noteworthy symbols of Finnish American culture.

Ethnic Symbols of the Finnish Americans

This study investigates the ethnic symbols of the Finnish Americans. Previously, it has been noted that two of the most fundamental building blocks of ethnicity are identity and culture. These elements play a critical role in the construction of ethnic boundaries and the production of meaning (Nagel 1994). Ethnic cultures recreate themselves, drawing from the group's past as they change into something different and new. For the Finnish Americans this is done in many ways. One way in which individuals construct their ethnic culture is through the use of culturally-specific symbols. These symbols serve as a way of creating boundaries around the group, as well as providing structures for group members to use in daily life. Those who know and understand the use and meaning of a group's symbols gain access into the group, whereas those who do not understand these symbols are outside the group (Barth 1969).

With this issue in mind, the Symbols of Finnishness scale was developed as a way of measuring the cultural boundary and collective meaning of this group. The symbols of Finnishness scale contained 106 items representing the Finnish and Finnish American themes of nature, people, institutions, history, and cultural objects. Respondents were given the chance to judge the importance of these items. A 7-point Likert scale was presented with each symbol. The scale was as follows: a response of 1 indicated that the symbol was "not important at all", 2= "not important", 3="not very important", 4="neutral", 5="somewhat important", 6="important", 7="very important". Additionally, a "0" response was included indicating "I don't know". Included in my discussion of these symbols lists are Eleanor Stoller's classifications of Finnish American ethnicity (Stoller 1996). These classifications are useful ways of discussing these symbols.

Subjects and Sample

The data used in this study is the result of 134 questionnaires which

were returned to me and used in a larger, yet unpublished study (Susag 1998). The data presented below is the result of finding item mean scores, standard deviations and frequency of responses "I don't know" for each item. A prototypical respondent was 61 years old, retired and living in rural parts of northern Minnesota. They self-reported as being of low to middle income with equal percentages of respondents having a high-school or college education. Additionally, this sample included more women than men (63% vs. 36%).

Table 1. Top 15 symbols of Finnishness ranked by mean.

Ranking	Symbol	M	% important
1	honesty	6.58	93
2	sauna	6.57	92
3	home	6.53	92
4	sisu	6.52	92
5	freedom	6.52	92
6	Finland	6.48	88
7	family	6.47	90
8	peace	6.39	85
9	independence	6.33	82
10	cleanliness	6.32	84
11	hardworking	6.27	87
12	freedom of speech	6.26	82
13	Finnish American buildings	6.17	78
14	church	6.10	78
15	lakes	6.05	78

Note: N= 134. Percentage of importance are those respondents who answered with a "6" (important) or "7" (very important).

Most Important Symbols of Finnishness

Listed below (Table 1) are the 15 most important symbols of Finnishness. Included in the table are the percentages of respondents who found the symbol important to their Finnishness.

Percentages indicate that these items were important to the vast majority of the respondent's Finnishness. These items represent strongly the theme of Finnish American behavioral traits (Stoller 1996). One notes the symbols honesty, sauna, sisu, cleanliness and hardworking but also the items independent, freedom of speech and freedom. These items highlight numerous behaviors of the Finnish Americans and give a highly socially acceptable image for the group. The list also includes the symbols Finland and Finnish flag. These items represent the country and heritage that the group has come from. It seems that it is important to group members to remember the past and the country from which Finnish Americanness is rooted.

Least Important Symbols of Finnishness

The 15 least valued symbols are listed in Table 2. The theme which emerges from this list involves characteristics which could be described as socially nondesirable. Being drunk along with Koskenkorva (a Finnish vodka), envy, and clumsiness are behaviors which one would expect to be de-emphasized in representing the group especially in the American context.

The items workers' movement and temperance movement represent the group's past accomplishments. These aspects of Finnish American life were points of division amongst the Finnish Americans. They were also defining points which differentiate them historically. Additionally, the items bear, marsh, granite, east, lipeäkala and Pori jazz were seen as unimportant. These items could be described as aspects of Finnish life and nature. Stoller has classified such items as Ancestral Homeland and Contemporary Finland (Stoller 1996).

Most Unknown Symbols of Finnishness

Next, ranked by frequency of response are the top 11 symbols unknown to the Finnish Americans. Included in this table are percentages reflecting frequency of responses.

Looking at this list one can see that a large percentage of the respondents did not know or did not value these items. Here we see again some items which were listed previously in the least valued symbols list. One can now say with reasonable assuredness that the items of Snellman (Finnish statesman), Kaukonen (Finnish-American musician), Mannerheim (Finland's military leader), Tappani (Finnish-American baseball player), Runeberg (Finnish poet), Kivi (Finnish writer), Aalto (Finnish designer) and Morton (founding father of the New Sweden colony in North America and signer of the Declaration of Independence) are not known by the Finnish Americans. These people, as noted above, are important Finns and Finnish Americans. It seems that some Finnish Americans in this group have a limited knowledge of Finnish history which is demonstrated by not knowing these people. Thus, they find the individuals as unimportant to the group's identity. This reflects what Stoller would classify as a weak knowledge of the Ancestral Homeland (Stoller 1996).

Most Controversial Symbols of Finnishness

Lastly, ranked by standard deviation is a list of the 15 most controversial symbols presented in Table 4. Also included in this table for each item are the percentages of respondents who considered the item important, not important, or neutral in importance. These symbols showed the widest deviation in scores and thus expressed the greatest differing of opinions

Table 2. Least valued 15 symbols of Finnishness ranked by mean.

Ranking	Symbols	M	% not important
1	being drunk	2.28	65
2	Koskenkorva	2.77	51
3	envy	3.01	38
4	clumsiness	3.07	39
5	J. Kaukonen	3.39	26
6	granite	4.02	14
7	bear	4.06	17
8	workers movement	4.08	21
9	Pori jazz	4.14	21
10	lipeäkala	4.17	20
11	ice hockey	4.20	15
12	east	4.31	15
13	J. Snellman	4.39	14
14	temperance movement	4.44	12
15	marshland	4.46	14

Note: N= 134. Percentage of non importance are those respondents who answered with a "1" (not important at all) or "2" (not important).

Table 3. Most unknown symbols of Finnishness ranked by frequency of response "I don't know".

Ranking	Symbol	Frequency	% unknown
1	J. Morton	52	51
2	J. Kaukonen	51	50
3	granite	49	46
4	J. Snellman	47	44
5	clumsiness	46	35
6	J. Runeberg	45	43
7	A. Kivi	41	40
8	A. Aalto	39	51
9	K. Tappani	31	30
10	C. G. Mannerheim	31	29
11	East	31	30

Note: N= 101–134. Percentage unknown are those respondents who answered with a "0" (I don't know).

Table 4. Most controversial symbols ranked by standard deviation.

Symbols		sd	% not imp.	N	% important
1	St. Urho	1.94	15	16	45
2	Pori jazz	1.88	21	30	26
3	workers movement	1.80	21	37	21
4	Koskenkorva	1.80	51	26	9
5	lipeäkala	1.80	20	31	27
6	J. Morton	1.75	12	41	27
7	being drunk	1.74	65	16	6
8	ice fishing	1.69	14	28	29
9	migrating birds	1.64	12	25	32
10	kalevalakoru	1.63	12	31	30
11	knife	1.63	12	24	35
12	east	1.62	15	40	24
13	Winter war	1.61	7	15	50
14	envy	1.61	38	41	6
15	agriculture	1.60	8	16	57

Note: N= 134. Percentage of non importance and importance are those respondents who answered with a "1" (not important at all) or "2" (not important), those answering with a "4" (neutral), and those who answered with a "6" (important) or "7" (very important).

concerning the importance of these items.

First, the items of being drunk, Koskenkorva and envy show a high degree of disagreement in responses. It is understandable that most people would find these descriptions of the Finnish Americans as socially undesirable and down-play their importance. However, some respondents found these items as important descriptions of group members. Thus, it seems that some group members found these descriptions accurate while others did not.

Lastly, I will point out that the item St. Urho was ranked as the most controversial item on this list. St. Urho is the fictional Saint of the Finnish Americans who supposedly stopped an invasion of grasshoppers. It seems that there is great debate as to whether St. Urho should be considered a true symbol of Finnishness.

Conclusions

The symbols of Finnishness lists showed that while there were those symbols which have come to represent something definite to this group, there is also some disagreement as to the importance of some symbols of Finnishness. Those symbols which were chosen to represent the most important symbols of Finnishness as well as the unimportant and controversial symbols point to the central role that a positive group image plays to symbol selection and social stereotyping. By this I mean that the important symbols of Finnishness list contained behavioral traits which were wholesome and socially desirable while in contrast, the unimportant and controversial symbols lists tended to be characterized as containing behavioral items which were socially undesirable. These findings reflect the need for one's group memberships to contribute something not only distinctive but positive to oneself. Thus, those symbols considered important or unimportant provide structure for the maintenance of Finnish American culture.

Lastly, I am interested in discussing the issue of constructing ethnic culture. The items Finnish American buildings, worker's movement and St. Urho are of interest here. While Finnish American buildings was found to be an important symbol of Finnishness, the other items appeared on the controversial symbols list. In both cases, the process of constructing Finnish American culture is highlighted. The respondents have differing opinions about the importance of the Finnish American symbols St. Urho and Worker's movement. Finnish Americans need to decide whether these cultural symbols should be included as important representations of the group or simply something trivial. Nevertheless, these items are certainly examples of the ways that the Finnish Americans distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups living in the Midwest.

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