



Finnish American Ethnic Identity and Sisu

During the Summer and Fall of 1991 I conducted a national mail survey of what second and later-generation Finnish-Americans from throughout the country believe and do about selected aspects of their ethnic heritage and identity. There were 447 responses. I compared responses of the second to the third and later generations to discover whether or not they differ in their ethnic identity.

Since the idea of *sisu* seems to be prevalent among Finnish-Americans, I assumed that this concept might be a focal point for Finnish-American identity, and that the respondents would know of it and have some beliefs about and examples of it. Specifically, I was looking for answers to several basic questions:

- 1) Do the respondents think of themselves as Finnish-Americans?
- 2) What do they think Finnish-Americans are like?
- 3) Do they believe that Finnish people have *sisu*?
- 4) How do they define *sisu* and what examples of it do they give?
- 5) At what age were they first exposed to the idea of *sisu*?

William R. Aho, Ph.D., is a Professor of Sociology at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. The author's paternal grandparents migrated from Finland in the early 1890s.

6) Have their own behaviors or attitudes been affected by their belief in *sisu*?

7) Have they passed the idea of *sisu* on to their children and if so, with what results?

What Is Sisu?

Sisu is one of those words that Finnish-speaking people believe is difficult to translate without losing its essence and the important nuances it carries. Eino Friberg, the Finnish-American translator of the national epic *The Kalevala*, refers to it as "guts or fortitude," but adds that, "It's much more than fortitude: It's an old characterization used by the Finnish people, maybe for the last ten thousand years" (Friberg, 1989).

In his introduction to Oskari Tokoi's autobiography, "*Sisu*", John Kolehmainen quotes the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius as comparing it to "a metaphysical shot in the arm, which makes a man do the impossible." and quotes Hudson Strode and David Hinshaw in viewing *sisu* as "... something that surpasses fearlessness and extraordinary endurance ... a kind of inner fire or superhuman nerve force ... courage, tenacity, stubborn determination, energy and a will and an ability to get things done" (Tokoi, 1957:ix).

Although most usage and definitions are on the positive side, *sisu* can have a

negative connotation as well, denoting someone who is extremely headstrong, stubborn beyond reason, angry and/or ill-tempered even if it is harmful to him/herself or others.

Very little empirical research has investigated the meaning of *sisu* or the consequences of believing in this important ethnic concept. Anja Olin-Fahle's anthropology doctoral dissertation documented the persistence of ethnicity among "a small Finnish enclave within an ethnically heterogeneous, politically sophisticated and economically diversified city on the eastern seaboard" (Olin-Fahle, 1983:i). She called this enclave "Finnhill" and found *sisu* to be "a major factor in promoting the cooperative housing projects which today provide cohesiveness to the community" (Olin-Fahle, 1983:ii). *Sisu* operated as a virtual defining characteristic for her respondents — when asked for some special characteristics of Finns one of the responses most often given was, "Finns are people who have *sisu*" (Olin-Fahle, 1983:l30).

Some interest in *sisu* as a research topic exists among scholars in Finland as well. This is evident in the words of Professor Päivikki Suojanen, who discovered in her research with Americans of Finnish descent that, "... the concept of *sisu* is a very central term for American Finnish character or personality ... maybe *sisu* is the key symbol for Finnishness" (Suojanen, 1991:np).

Of course other ethnic or racial groups have ethnic and cultural concepts somewhat similar to *sisu* (Soul, Chutzpah and Machismo for example). While these are thought to characterize some or all members of the relevant groups, they seem not to be as central to the members' ethnic or racial identity and character as *sisu* is to Finns.

The Sample and Data Collection

A total of 447 respondents from throughout the country completed a one-page, self-administered, anonymous questionnaire during July through October of 1991. The majority of these were distributed by mail to 91 Finnish-American organizations listed in the latest national directory published by FinnFest USA, Inc. In addition, two Finnish-American newspapers with national circulations, the *Raivaaja* and *The Finnish-American Reporter* solicited respondents, the former with an article and the latter by printing a copy of the questionnaire. A copy was also printed in the monthly newsletter of the Finnish Center Association of Farmington Hills, Michigan. Other questionnaires were given to the author's friends, relatives and other persons known to be of Finnish descent. During the survey it became clear that a number of people who had seen or received a questionnaire were supplying them to some of their friends, relatives and/or acquaintances.

Generation Definitions

Second generation is defined as those who were born in America with at least one parent born in Finland and third and later generation as those who were born in America of American-born parents. Based on the ages of the respondents who were clearly not second generation and the open-ended comments they made about their Finnish ancestors, a determination was made that virtually all of them are third generation. Since specific data to establish this was not gathered and a few could be in generations beyond the third, the label "Third and Later Generations" has been used. This does not adversely affect the analysis because the

focus is on characteristics of the second generation compared to those who are not.

The Survey Findings

The respondents are a population of primarily older persons, 59 percent of them women (all percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number). Only eight percent are under age forty, nearly two-thirds are sixty or over and 39 percent seventy or older. Their background is quite definitely one of Finnish heritage — 86 percent had two Finnish parents and 67 percent are second generation. Fifty percent married a person of Finnish heritage, and 93 percent report that in general they think of themselves as Finnish-Americans.

About three-fourths (73 percent) report that half or more of their childhood friends and acquaintances were of Finnish heritage and over two-thirds (68 percent) report Finnish heritage for half or more of their neighbors while they were growing up.

Ninety-one percent believe that people of Finnish heritage have *sisu* and the most frequently mentioned definitions were Persistence, Guts, Determination and Courage.

Eighty-two percent believe that their own behavior or attitudes have been affected by *sisu*, and most first heard of the word in their own families and while quite young — 43 percent before age ten and another 30 percent between age ten and eighteen for a total of 73 percent or nearly three-fourths before adulthood.

Nearly three-fourths have taught their own children about *sisu*, with 65 percent reporting what they consider to be positive results.

In response to an item asking the respondents to describe in general what

Finnish people are like, the most frequent responses were: hardworking (41 percent), honest (36), quiet/reserved (24), slow to make friends but make very good friends once they do (15), stubborn (11) and clean (10). Multiple responses were possible.

The only question which revealed any substantial difference between second and third or later-generation responses (and this only for the males) was the one on the age at which they first heard or read the word *sisu*: About 76 percent of the second generation compared to 58 percent of the third or later generation males responded in the "before age 18" category. The later generation males are learning about *sisu*, but later in life. For the women the responses were 62 and 60 percent, respectively.

One of the most important and interesting findings is that quite high percentages (ranging from 77 to 86 percent) of all the respondents, regardless of generation, believe that their ideas about *sisu* have affected their own behaviors and/or attitudes. This is true for higher percentages of the second generation women than men and for more of the later than earlier generations. By this important criteria then, a belief in and the practice of *sisu* is quite alive and well and is not diminishing.

Selected Examples of Sisu

An important stimulus to this research was Professor John Kolehmainen's observation in the introduction to Oskari Tokoi's *Sisu* that, "It may well be that the lives of men and women who have triumphed over well-nigh insuperable odds will yield a fuller and richer insight into the meaning of *sisu* than a dictionary. Perhaps *sisu* is lived, not defined" (Tokoi, 1957:ix). The importance and meaning of

sisu is best understood then by being getting examples from those who believe their own lives have been affected by it.

The respondents provided some vivid examples of *sisu*, most from their personal experiences, ranging from the relatively trivial (it helps me cope with a visit to the dentist) to the personally (it saved someone's life) or nationally vital (it saved Finland from Soviet domination in the Winter War).

The hundreds of examples of *sisu* offered by the respondents were fascinating, revealing, and touching. They can be grouped into several categories (not in rank order):

- Health and Illness
- Death
- The Immigrant Experience
- Economic Problems
- War/Military Experiences
- Peacetime Dangers
- Career/Work/Educational Goals and Problems
- Other Life Problems

Their examples are best illustrated in their own words:

"I like to think of my grandmother as having *sisu*. She was left in the late 1800s after the death of her husband with seven small children and 360 acres. She worked, handled working men, handled finances, was successful when all believed she'd fail. Never spoke the English language used her children as interpreters. That strikes me as having *sisu*." (A retired nurse in her seventies, 2nd generation.)

"My grandfather was confronted by a black bear and was able to fend it off." (An office manager in her thirties, 3rd generation.)

"... several of my relatives survived years of Stalin's slave labor camps in Russia." (A retired quality control inspector in her seventies, 2nd generation.)

"The Finnish people of the Upper Peninsula (of Michigan) were ... very, very poor. With nothing but sweat equity they made 'a life' in a very hostile environment (climate and discrimination). It took real *sisu* to pull through." (An engineering supervisor in her fifties, 2nd generation.)

"My brother suffered a massive stroke and was paralyzed ... Spent 18 days at his side and kept repeating 'Where's your *sisu*?' even for the week he was in a coma. In three months he remembered my telling him about his *sisu*." (A retired drug store clerk in her seventies, 2nd generation.)

"As a teenage bride without a high school diploma I was told I'd ruined my chances at a good life. After 40 years of marriage, graduation from school, raising four children we are proud of, I think *sisu* may have played a part in my 'good life.'" (A homemaker and mother in her fifties, 3rd generation.)

"I went through medical school at age 35 when my children were growing up. I finished and I remain practicing in an increasingly hostile environment of medicine today." (A physician in her fifties, 3rd generation.)

"When my (two) children were born, I had no medications or sedatives. Natural childbirth suggests having an object to look at as a focal point during labor. My husband made me a sign that said *sisu*." (A teacher, wife, mother in her forties, 3rd generation.)

"During World War II while on night maneuvers I was expected to climb up a steep 700-foot incline with a 60 pound pack on my back. There were times when I was ready to quit, but it was my *sisu* that got me to the top." (A retired Marine officer in his seventies, 2nd generation.)

"My husband and son were critically injured in an accident in 1981. The

months of recovery and uncertainty took its toll. I had to draw on an inner reserve my *sisu* to get through the really tough times." (A medical technologist in her forties, 3rd generation.)

"When my 24 year old son, a journalism teacher, and his fiancée (an art teacher) were killed instantly (in a car accident) ... I thought I could never be normal again. But God, and *sisu* showed me how I must be strong and support my grieving husband and two younger children." (A retired secretary in her seventies, 2nd generation.)

"My family survived the 1930s Depression because of *sisu*." (An international family planning specialist in his fifties, 2nd generation.)

Discussion

There is a clear, consistent and striking pattern in the findings of the survey: respondents in both categories of generation and sex reflect a very high level of self-identification as Finnish-Americans; they believe that people of Finnish heritage have *sisu*, which they define as perseverance; determination, guts or courage; they learned about it themselves as children (which for many is 60 or more years ago); their own behavior and/or attitudes have been affected by it; and they have passed the idea on to their own children with positive results.

Taken together, these empirical research findings constitute strong evidence of the existence, persistence and conscious passing on of important behaviors and attitudes grounded in an ethnic characteristic.

It is evidence of the second generation learning from the first and teaching the third — of an unbroken chain to later generations. It is not consistent with the view that ethnicity today does not have

much meaning behaviorally or attitudinally, does not occur in lived experience and is merely symbolic, passive or attenuated (See for example Kivisto, 1989:86; Roche, 1984:167–169).

Interestingly, the second generation respondents are more, not less, inclined than the later generations to view themselves as hyphenated Americans. This runs counter to historian Marcus Lee Hansen's "principle of third generation interest," formulated in 1937 and treated extensively in Kivisto and Blanck's edited volume on American immigrants (1990). Hansen claimed that the second generation would cope with the dualism into which they had been born by forgetting and escaping from the cultural heritage of their parent(s) (Hansen, 1990:195). This included language, religion, family customs anything foreign. But, wrote Hansen, the fears of the foreign-born parents are eased by the revival of the ethnic culture by their grandchildren. "What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" is the oft-quoted Hansen principle.

By culture Hansen meant customs and interests, the music and art from Europe which was different from that of what he termed "the Yankees," meaning the old or established Americans, and which derived from English and British culture. Because the third generation, the grandchildren, were "... as American as any of their neighbors," and with no language accent or inferiority problems, "in the face of persons of Mayflower or Knickerbocker descent" they could and would express an interest in the culture of their grandparents (Hansen, 1990:209). He suggested that third generation members could select from those aspects of cultural life that should be added to the heritage of America (Hansen, 1990:210).

The results of this survey indicate that the second generation did not forget, therefore there is not any question of a resurgence of ethnic culture or identity but rather evidence of a continuation of a consistently high level of ethnic self-identity, behavior and attitudes being taught by the second to the third and later generations and being successfully passed on to their descendants.

The evidence provided here is only partly consistent with the view of Herbert Gans that people want to maintain their ethnic identity as a symbolic and nostalgic one "... a love for or pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior" (Gans, 1979:9). These respondents do incorporate at least the important ethnic attitude and belief of *sisu* in much of their important everyday behavior.

The results of this survey may not be surprising, since the Finnish-American ethnic attributes and personal characteristics fit so well with the dominant American values of hard work, persistence, honesty, and cleanliness. The fact

that the idea of *sisu* is so closely tied to their ethnicity seems to convince the respondents that it is because of their Finnish, not their American, heritage that they have this quality. But this may not be so much a sign of assimilation of Finnish immigrants and their descendants into the American society, as of cultural pluralism or the coexisting persistence of important ethnic and cultural values, attitudes and behaviors which are compatible with those of the dominant, host society.

Because this is not a random sample, representative of all Finnish Americans, but one obtained primarily through Finnish organizations and publications, we cannot generalize to all Americans of Finnish heritage. Nevertheless, our respondents do constitute a recent, large and geographically diverse number of Finnish-Americans which can be useful as a database for comparisons with future samples to chart trends and stimulate some ideas and discussion about the meaning of Finnish-American ethnicity and its likely future.

Literature

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