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American Finnish Identity

Who am I, where do I come from, where do I belong, who do I want to identify with? How does an American Finn find his identity and continuity for his existence in the middle of changes? Identity itself and **experiences and emotions** related to it are also characteristic of every Finnish emigrant. Identity develops from the complex relationship between personal, individual, cultural and outside influences (Eidheim 1969; Erikson 1968; Kivistö 1989, 1990; Royce 1982; Sollors 1989; Suojanen 1990). The central cultural qualities which affect an emigrant are the source and the target cultures, the Finnish and the American cultures.

We are, however, living in a limited world: we do not adopt either **all** the Finnish cultural models or all the American ones (cf. Leino 1983; Envall & al. 1989). But we have to remember that our **cultural identity** is not moulded only by our immediate surroundings. Man has the ability to make wishes, to dream and to expand his inner reality. The expectations, fantasies and hopes just as well as the daily routines steer the processes which mould the self-consciousness of a Finnish emigrant.

The forming of **identity**, that is, **social and personal culturalego**, is an intensive biographical course of events (Suojanen

1989, 1990). It begins from early childhood experiences in the homeland and continues in the new country after the emigration and the change; in other words, it goes on all through life. We should continuously study the identity of American Finns, because we are not talking about a stable, nonchangeable quality, which remains the same through generations. American Finns know from experience that each major change in life makes you wonder about the past and re-evaluate life time and again. Who exactly am I (**factual identity**)? If I had done something differently, this would not have happened; what would I want to be like, if... (**ideal identity**). (Ofstad 1971.) A familiar biographical re-evaluation to all of us.

Moving from Finland to the American continent is, irrespective of generation, more or less of a **culture shock**. Geographical distance, your own culture and the alien culture, speculation about permanent or temporary emigration, new environment, new people — these are the chief causes of a culture shock.

Theories on migration as a culture shock

a) *Grief and bereavement theory*

Many theories exist on culture shock. According to **grief and bereavement theory** (Bowlby 1960, 1961, 1969; cf. Freud 1957; Averill 1968), the shock results in the feeling of grief and loss when moving. Emigra-

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tion is experienced as painful. Among American Finns there are many **stories of suffering** (cf. Roos 1987): emigration is seen as a loss of one's roots and as a collapse of geographical, emotional and cognitive world. These used to be self-evident and a privilege, though they were subconscious. But an emigrant has to struggle for them every day.

The emigration is preceded and followed by grief work. In addition to the "normal" grief work, the emigrants experience forbidden, shortened, anticipated, delayed and continuous grief ('typical grief reactions' see Furnham-Bochner 1986, 165; Averill 1968). This becomes evident especially in the speculation about returning to Finland. They say that they want to go back, but that it is impossible: all the bonds are broken. Who would want to go to the old homeland to die alone? The other side of the coin in grief is loneliness and separation: the pain from the death of social bonds never seems to ease.

b) Locus of control and fatalism theory

The stories of American Finns can also be looked at from the point of view of **locus of control and fatalism theory** (Rotter 1966, 1; Weiner 1980; Furnham & Henry 1980; Furnham 1985). Many emigrants firmly believe that life in the new country depends, above all, on themselves, their own decisions and behaviour. These Finnish emigrants believe that they are in control of their own life. On the other hand, many emigrants believe in fate. They feel that circumstances, outside influences and powers steer and shape their life. Their life is controlled by other things, independent of them and their doings. It is obvious that the emigration process is an ordeal.

c) Selective migration theory

Finns have sought various things from America: most emigrants, especially the

first generation, wanted work, a better living and a better quality of life. It becomes clear from the statements of the emigrants who moved at the beginning of the century that migration was not obligatory in the real meaning of the word. They state that "we had to leave", "we could not get along" or "something had to be done, because there was no food". **Selective migration theory** tries to explain adaptation to a new culture. This neo-Darwinian idea is one of the oldest and most popular explanations for the different patterns of reaction to new environments by migrants (cf. later ideas e.g. Cochrane 1983; Krupinski et al. 1973). According to the theory, the more strictly they are selected, the better they adapt to the new country. This theory can be applied only in a small scale to the Finnish emigrants, because Finns moving to America were not 'selected' using external or other criteria. They selected themselves; they chose emigration more or less randomly, but consciously. Conscious, independent emigration is especially characteristic of the recent Finnish emigrants to America.

Nowadays host countries have very strict criteria on who can emigrate. They take into consideration, for example, the following points: how many, what kind, when, age, profession, sex, social, political and economic status. The chosen ones go through a very dense sieve. Emigrants are a special group: not anyone is allowed to emigrate.

Although selective migration theory cannot be applied to Finnish migrants, it can be asked what kinds of criteria they fulfilled. In addition to the criteria that was just mentioned, it would be interesting to see what they are like as people, as personalities. What common and distinctive features can be found between them?

When thinking about Finnish emigrants to America, selective migration theory is

also interesting, because it pays attention to different **coping strategies**. What have been the strategies of a Finnish American to cope in the middle of a new country, new conditions, alien environment and culture, with new people and a strange language? Is a Finnish emigrant exceptionally ambitious and stable when it comes to personality? If he is, the coping strategy would not be an escape from something or a casual drifting, but taking emigration as a challenge. We can assume that an emigrant has a good inner control of life since he leaves his home country for good. Because the exterior control of life does not seem to work in the homeland, he courageously seeks it in another country. This demands a stable inner control of life.

d) Expectation theory

Expectation theory (e.g. Feather 1982; Cochrane 1983; Littlewood & Lipsedge 1982) can be used in trying to explain the relationship between the expectations and cultural adaptation of a Finnish emigrant in America. Many Finnish emigrants did not have any specific expectations, but more like general, indefinite hopes of happiness and a better life. At the beginning of the century when a young boy, for example, left to search happiness in America, he did not have the identity of a Finnish adult. The roots he carried with him were connected with **identity models of his childhood home**. He did not have a clear view of Finnish society and world view. The following sentences describe his Finland-identity: "Finland was poor", "there was always a shortage of everything", "I did not even have any shoes in Finland", "I lived with my mom in a little cottage, and there was so little food that I left". The adult identity of such an emigrant has been moulded by the experiences in the new country: the image of Finland is still narrow, often pessimistic and shattered, dat-

ing from childhood. Some people of this generation are opposed to, so called, Finlandization: "we do not want to be isolated Finns; America is our homeland; Finland was poor, cold and did not take care of its people.". The new identity has been moulded by the immediate surroundings, cultural influences and experiences in the new homeland.

But, for example, a 35-year-old Finn who has a profession, family and various interest groups in Finland at the time of the emigration has different expectations. He has the identity of an adult when he leaves Finland. In a way, he is a "grown person". Although emigration is connected with feelings of grief and loss, his own Finnish self-consciousness is stronger and more stable, whether it is positive or negative. Image of Finland and of Finnishness is also more holistic. At least it is moulded by the life of an adult. Expectations of a Finnish emigrant with an identity of an adult may be large or small, positive or doubtful, but he can be expected to deal with the conflicting expectations in a more stable and conscious way. Among Finnish Americans there are those who actively or passively accept Americanization and those who are opposed to it. Many of them have a clear **double identity**.

According to expectation theory the more realistic expectations the emigrant has, the better he will adapt to the new environment. Most of our older informants underlined that they "came to work here". This, of course, pleased the employers. Even nowadays Finns have a good reputation of being honest and faithful, which makes adaptation easier. The feeling of being socially accepted in a new country, at work and at school are important cornerstones in the moulding process of an emigrant's identity. The more unrealistic expectations, aims and dreams the emigrant has, the deeper and longer is the

culture shock and the bigger the risk of falling ill and feeling uncomfortable.

The social, economic, geographical, political and religious expectations of a Finnish emigrant in the new country can also be examined through expectation theory. It is unlikely that a Finn would voluntarily move to America if his expectations were infinitesimal. There is an urgent need to study the relationship between the quality of expectations of different emigrant generations and the reality of the new country.

e) Negative life-events theory

The nature of the change in the life of a Finnish emigrant in America can be studied through negative **life-events theory**. For nearly twenty years psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists have been collecting evidence on the relationship between recent stressful life-events and psychological and physical illness (Rahe et al. 1964) According to the theory, experiencing change and adapting to a new environment is stressing and often the cause of some form of mental or physical illness (e.g. Holmes & Rahe 1967, 216; Guthrie 1981; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend 1974; Monroe 1982; Hinkle 1974). The greater the change, the more probable the stress.

What kinds of physical and mental illnesses, stress and burnout does a Finnish American suffer from? Their stories of life contain many stories of illnesses as well. Negative life-events are not the only ones to cause stress and adaptation difficulties. Learning English the hard way has not necessarily led to depression or neurosis. The theory claims that positive life-events in a new country can also be stressing; that is why also adapting to them is important. It would be interesting to study how common it is that the expected higher standard of living does not lead to better physical and

mental well-being. Being under supervision and experiencing threat and insecurity can also cause stress and illness.

The consequences of a change in life are different with different people. It is impossible to predict who will suffer from a certain mental or physical illness. Although negative life-events theory is intriguing, a link between life-events and illnesses or difficulties in adaptation is hard to prove. This point of view is, however, a good basis for someone who wants to learn to understand emigration experiences, culture shock and life-events of an emigrant and the difficulties of encountering an unknown culture.

f) Social support network theory

There is a rapidly growing, already considerable body of literature in clinical, community, medical and applied psychology regarding the supportive functions of interpersonal relationships (see e.g. Cobb 1976; Nathanson 1980; Fiore & al. 1983; Leavy 1983; Hammer 1981; Syrotuik & D'Arcy 1984). **Social support network theory** helps us to understand the importance of social relationships between Finnish emigrants in America. The support of other people has a protective influence on the well-being of an emigrant and the quality and amount of his culture shock. The situation is most favorable when the whole family has moved to America, where they already have friends, acquaintances and maybe relatives. People who they can turn to are waiting for them. But the situation of a Finnish mother who stays at home may be more problematic, because **work has been discovered to be an important provider of support and a factor which makes adaptation easier**. That is why, for example, refugees and immigrants in Finland should find a job as soon as possible. They can spend a lot of time working while various departments look through their

papers and applications. This way shock experiences and deviating behaviour are minimized. The adaptation of children in the family may be quicker: the new language and cultural skills are taken in at school and in various interest groups. The position of a Finnish American mother who stays at home is, in this respect, weak: she cannot learn the necessary cultural and language skills or develop a social network connected with work.

g) Theory on value differences

The socio-psychological **theory on value differences** tries to explain unsuccessful adaptation and culture shocks through the conflicting value differences between the emigrant and the target country. Ever since the work of Merton (1938) on the relationship between social structure and anomie, sociologists and psychologists have seen a link between deviance, delinquency and mental disorder, and a conflict in cultural values (about cross-cultural value studies see e.g. Ng & al. 1982; European Value Systems Study Group document 1982; Feather 1979). When a person moves into an alien culture, the cultural values and expectations of his own country no longer apply in the new country. But still we often assume that they do, because we try to explain our observations by using the things we know and the things that are in our framework. We like to use our observations to support our ideas, values and attitudes, but not to check or change them. This tendency is bound to fail in the new country. A constant crashing of cultural values and questioning familiar rules causes stress and continuous feelings of being culturally incompetent and inferior. Certain values may be easier to bear, adapt to and bend in than others. It is not, however, easy to predict who will experience what kinds of sufferings caused by value differences.

Emigration and changing values

Where has a Finnish American taken elements from for his set of values? (Ahlman 1929; Rauste-von Wright 1984; Rescher 1969.) What is his opinion about money, honesty, efficiency, equality, shared responsibility, property, social status, work, respect for old and young people, hospitality, individuality, peacefulness, accuracy, obedience, religion, war, peace, the future? I am sure the set of values of a person with a childhood Finnish identity and a person who has left Finland as an adult are quite different; the values of a Finn with a childhood identity are probably more strongly moulded by the American culture.

In this connection we can take a few examples of American Finnish world view in the light of my empirical material (interviews and value inquiries in Florida and Maryland from 1989 to 1990). Since the final analysis has not yet been completed, here will be presented some of the most interesting cases and preliminary findings.

Many migrants went to the New Continent to look for happiness, a better life and a higher living. We, me and my linguist husband, heard many kinds of stories: stories of sufferings, stories of no options, stories of happiness, stories hidden behind the facade of gaiety (Roos 1987). In our inquiry the migrants were asked to list approximately three characteristic features of a good life. Their expectations also gave an approximate image about their world of values.

A good life in the minds of American Finns living in Florida and Maryland reflect a **materialistic** world of values: both the first and second American Finnish generation emigrants listed a good living as the first characteristic of a good life. **Egocentric** world of values was the second one: it is important to be healthy, to have a family, a spouse, children and good

friends. **Spiritual** values in the form of religion was the third feature (even though many informants do not officially belong to any church). Education was the fourth characteristic of a good life. It can here be categorized as **egocentric instrumental value**: education, which is one of the basic expectations, guarantees a good living.

This list can be compared with a similar kind of list which was made by Finns in Finland in the 1980's. The most important factors of a good life for them were the following: work, working conditions, money, a good living and health. After these came family relations (spouse and children), a peaceful, secure and happy life and spare time and hobbies. (Suhonen 1988.) Religion is **not** included in this list at all. Why? But then again, American Finns do not dream about leisure time or hobbies. Why?

Finally, let us take a short look at the basic values of American Finns today. Our inquiry included open and closed questions, and they revealed that the three most important things in the lives of our American Finnish informants are the following: firstly, salvation of soul; secondly, peace; and thirdly, health. About 50 per cent of the informants want to hold on to their conventional manners. Migration to the other continent, however, means that an emigrant cannot be very traditional; they find themselves in the middle of an alien country, strange conditions and possibly they do not have a command of the language required by the new cultural environment.

Over 90 per cent of the interviewees want to preserve good relations with all their friends. Friendship was also ranked high on the list of expectations of a good life, and it is easy to see that an emigrant has to be exceptionally social. It is difficult to make friends if you are a shy, timid and introvert person and if you feel repressed

and isolated. Bravery, a reasonable amount of cultural flexibility and tolerance of sociocultural deviance may be the keys to individuality and strong identity to these American Finns. They have to be prepared to tolerate many changes in order to get along in a new cultural setting: different jobs, moving from one place to another, separation from family and friends, divorce, illness and even death.

Over 80 per cent of the informants want to do something new and original with their lives (reflection on the wish to pursue wealth and happiness). They want to do things they have always wanted to do and things that would make them happy. This could be compared with the Finnish proverb "Jokainen on oman onnensa seppä", which means that you are the master of your own fate. It is remarkable, however, that most of our interviewees have not, for some reason or other, been able to do very much of the things that they would have wanted to.

Only less than one third of the interviewees regarded having an exciting life more valuable than having a secure life. Especially women appreciated security. Over 90 per cent estimated that an average, but secure living is more valuable than a job with top earnings. The majority of our informants also appreciated work which was appealing to them more than a job with a high salary. Many American Finns have made an average living by being, for example, housekeepers, butlers, lumbermen or owning a business, such as a bakery, a restaurant or a car repair shop. It became clear that our informants feel envious of those Finnish Finns who come to America, for example, to Florida, to make money and profitable investments by dishonest means. Nearly 90 per cent of the informants, men especially, think that it is worth while to take risks in life "Life is one big risk", says one of the interviewees.

Summary in Finnish: Amerikansuomalainen identiteetti

Artikkelissa tarkastellaan amerikansuomalaisen identiteetin tutkimusta mahdollistavia teoreettisia malleja. Tarkastelun peruslähtökohtana on väite siitä, että siirtolaisuus on kokemuksena **kulttuurishokki** ja sitä seuraava elämä eriasteista sopeutumista **muutokseen, selviytymisstrategioiden kehittämistä** ja aiemmasta poikkeavan **kulttuuri-itseyden** päivittäistä uudelleen löytämistä ja hahmottamista. Siirtolaisidentiteetti ei siis ole pysyvä, vaan muuttuva, elinaikaista testaamista, löytämistä, havainnointia omassa itsessä, suhteessa ulospäin omaan etniseen ryhmään ja ”muihin” eli ryhmän ulkopuolisiin koetettava kulttuuri-itseyden elämänjatkumo.

Siirtolaisidentiteettiä, joka usein on **kaksoisidentiteetin** tai **tasapainoilijan identiteetin** luonteinen (1. siirtolaiskukupolvi), pohdiskellaan **suru- ja menetysteorian, kontrolli- eli fatalismiteorian, selektiivisen maastamuuttoteorian, odotusarvoteorian, negatiivisten elämäkokemusten teorian, tukiverkostoteorian ja arvoero-teorian** valossa. Niistä jokainen luotaa siirtolaisen muuttoelämästä kapealta osal-

taan, mutta mikään ei riitä tyhjentäväksi kokonaisteoriaksi käsiteltävän ilmiön kannalta.

Lopuksi tarkastellaan esimerkinomaisesti amerikansuomalaista arvomaailmaa v. 1989–90. Artikkelin aineisto perustuu antropologiseen kenttätöyöhön, jota tohtorit Päivikki ja Matti Suojanen suorittivat Yhdysvalloissa amerikansuomalaisten parissa Indianan yliopistossa ensin v. 1985–86 (Indiana, Illinois, Washington, Oregon, Kalifornia) ja sitten v. 1989–90 Marylandin yliopiston vaihtoprofessoreina (Florida, Maryland; Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin). V. 1989–90 tutkimus keskittyi Floridaan. Kenttätö perustuu antropologiseen case studyyn: teemahaastatteluihin, osallistuvaan havainnointiin, kotien videointiin ja valokuvaukseen, arvokyselyihin, minäkuva- ja piirrosteihin.

The article is based on the anthropological fieldwork of Drs Päivikki and Matti Suojanen, which was carried out from 1985 to 1986 and from 1989 to 1990 among American Finns in the United States (Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin; Indiana, Illinois, Washington, Oregon, California). This lecture was given by Dr. Päivikki Suojanen at Finn Fest in Lake Worth, Florida, in April, 1991.

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