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People in motion, a historical perspective

A narrative about leaving and change

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to shed light on one immigrant’s experience of leaving and changes, of being forced to abandon the family home. Though decision to return and eventually did so, the informant later chose to leave again, reorienting towards new possibilities elsewhere. The informant related, in an oral interview, memories of the 1930s and 1940s; telling this story nearly seventy years after. Taking a life-story approach, I analyze this narrative of leaving and change, building on the idea that individually narrated memories can contribute knowledge and understanding to the field of immigrant studies. Experiences of insecurity and the search for a place where one feels safe and comfortable result from being forced to leave one’s home, all that is familiar, and from starting over. In this context, while the informant’s initial exodus was beyond control, later move to start over in a new country appears to reflect one’s own choice.

Keywords: life story, breakup, change, identity.

Introduction

I have become increasingly interested in investigating people’s told memories and experiences, life history and life stories. Over time, my research has focused on young people’s experiences from seeking protection and somewhere to live. This article relates the memories and experiences of one elder woman who, when she was young, sought refuge in Sweden from the aftermath of World War II, the Winter war and the Continuation war. Nearly seventy years later, she told me her remembered and lived experiences from life before the war, beyond and after the war. The story she told me starts when she was eleven years old. Life was calm and filled with games and
swimming with siblings. The family lived together in a nice, newly built house in a beautiful neighborhood in south east of Finland. This was a harmonious time. But everything was changed.

It was after the war, the First World War. My father became ill and was hospitalized. Then they came and built a house for us, and we lived there for three years, until the new war came. It was a lovely house near a bay like this. The house was on the lake, and the land went around so we had two sides of the lake. We would splash around in the still lake water. We had a pig that always sneaked down to the beach and swam with us. We moved in when I was eleven, and I was fourteen when the war new began.

When she was fourteen, 1939, the family was evacuated from Karelia. They were forced to leave their home for a more secure place, a new homestead, and a new place to live in. Shortly after the arrival to the new house she started to move around by herself. For years she searched for a place to fit in, a work and for opportunities to support herself. She tried to make a life on her own. During this time she once went back to the family house and found it burned down. Her family never went back. She stayed in Finland during the war years and nearly six years after the family evacuation she visited her sisters in their foster families in Sweden. It was a short visit and she went back to Finland. But shortly after, 1945, she really moved to Sweden. She found a job, settled down inch by inch and raised a family. She started to learn the new language by reading to a child and by communicating to friends. There was no education in first or second language courses offered in Sweden those days.

This woman’s voice forms the foundation of my approach to interpret her narrative about leaving and changes in the 1930s and 1940s.

Purpose and research questions

The main purpose of this article is to interpret remembered and told experiences of leaving and changes. What events and circumstances are told and what is communicated? What have leaving and changes meant, how is participation in society created and what did the informant wanted to convey with this story?

To start with, individually told memories can contribute knowledge and understanding about ones experiences. The narrator perceives and organizes such events in a particular
way, connecting the told experiences with other life experiences when telling them. Memories of events long ago change both over time and in the light of new experiences and circumstances. But, leaving behind an established life, changes and orienting oneself towards an entirely new existence raises concerns about what one has left and where one belongs.

Present article, which includes told memories from long time ago, is part of a more comprehensive study. This life story interpretation will be intertwined with memories, told by young peoples, about leaving and changes in more present days.

People in motion: A historical perspective

During the Second World War, the Winter War and the Continuation war about 80,000 Finnish children were evacuated from Finland to Sweden. Parents wanted to protect their children from war, the children could get better food and medical treatment away from the war. Some of them came with their mothers, some came unaccompanied and most of them were placed in private homes. Some of these children came back to Finland and some, about 7,500, did not, they stayed in Sweden (Kavén 2012). The older children "... the forgotten group ..." (Korppi-Tommola 2008, p. 451.), who stayed in Finland during the war years, was active in the Finnish labor market. And some of these youngsters sought safety and labor in Sweden without their families. They came as unaccompanied.

Sweden has a long tradition of both emigration and immigration. At the beginning of the 1900s, a quarter of the Swedish population had left for America, Australia and other countries, often because of religious persecution and starvation. But, people’s movement changed direction during the Second World War. People sought safety, and immigration to Sweden outstripped its emigration. During the early 2010s, people on the run from war and persecution have again sought asylum in Sweden (Ekberg & Rooth 2000, pp. 8.). Each year, many from around the globe attempt to leave behind war, poverty, and persecution. According to one estimate, today there are forty-five million refugees in the world (Amnesty International 2014, p. 3.).

When people move between countries, young persons and children move as well.
Young persons and children seeking protection

When parents wish to protect their children from war and persecution, one strategy is to send them away. The number of unaccompanied children and young people that have come to Sweden in 2014 seeking refuge from war and persecution is set to increase over previous years’ figures. In order to meet their needs the Swedish government has made it easier for unaccompanied minors to stay. In Sweden every child has the right to receive education and primary education is compulsory. Children with foreign background and a mother tongue other than Swedish have the right to instructions in Swedish as a second language, in mother tongue and they have the right to receive mother tongue tutorial in other subjects (Skolverket 2011, pp. 87; Skolverket 201, pp. 239; Torpsten 2008, pp. 90.).

In this context it is important to emphasize those young immigrants can’t be considered as a homogeneous group in terms of experiences and needs. They all have their different abilities, desires and wants. School, teachers and society have to deal with this.

Alienation, ambivalence, and activity

Consequences for the formation of one’s identity when being forced to leave one’s life and to start over elsewhere are made visible in three factors: alienation as identity, ambivalence as identity, and activity as identity (Wigg 2008, pp. 27.). When a person is forced to leave her life behind she can feel divorced from her true self. Her senses of foreignness could result in an identity as alienated because she does not belong or fit in anywhere. She can feel ambivalent and uncertain about the future, where she belongs and what to do about it. The old life does not exist anymore. The new is uncertain and unknown. The individual longs for the known and in order to reach balance in life one strives towards a new place to fit into. Through actions such as getting education the individual creates opportunities for a new future and life, for togetherness and creates an identity of activeness. Young refugees’ memories visualize their experiences of loss, adaptation, and rebirth (Torpsten 2008, p. 117.) which include feelings of a lost childhood, lost mother tongue and a sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere (Korppi-Tommola 2008, p. 450.), an identity of alienation. Other consequences are experiences of discrimination and a fear of the unknown. But they may engage in activities such as learning the new language, the dominant language. Linguistic skills in
the dominant language can open doors to a new life. Those language keys create new opportunities. Focusing on themselves, their needs and possibilities allows these young immigrants to balance the new and the old. Moving to a new country could mean that one’s world is changed; things taken for granted before can no longer be counted on. Knowledge of one’s old life, the old world, is perceived as less useful. The new world feels so different that the old one is perceived as lost. Empirical evidence attests a strong sense of rebirth along with feelings of fundamental change and a distance from the old life as adapting to the new. The sentiments of being reborn are strongly associated with being forced to start over and to learn everything from scratch (Torpsten 2008, p. 116.).

Young migrants’ relationship with parents has been highlighted as central to the desire for repatriation and its intensity (Bunar 1998, pp. 10.). Young migrant people might know that the prospects of finding work and a good life are better in Sweden than in their countries of origin. At the same time, some wish to return, perhaps for their parents’ sake and ambivalence becomes a dilemma.

**Language knowledge and theories of social capital**

In the context of this study, skills in a country’s dominant language (Milani 2007, pp. 4.) are seen as keys to closed doors, to successful co-existence in the new environment and to life chances (Torpsten 2011, pp. 37-45.). Mastery of a language can be spoken about in terms of social and cultural capital. Such skills can be understood as representing both people’s struggle for higher positions in society and reproduction of the dominant culture through education and language. An individual can improve her social position by cultivating her knowledge of the dominant language. By increasing her social and cultural capital she becomes less subordinate. “With languages one can move from one social situation to another. With language one is at home everywhere” (de Waal 2012, p. 39.). An individual gains access to the surrounding world by knowing the dominant language.

**Linguistic constructions and practice**

Linguistic structures both shape and are shaped by other practices and structures. One example of social practice that affects and is affected by norms and context is the way individuals are constructed as citizens (Benhabib 2004, pp. 89.). Different ways of talking about individuals and their needs, as well as membership in a community, divide
and organize these phenomena, shaping reality so that some individuals are considered helpless, while others are deemed competent, human beings thus create relations. Those who have full membership in a community have power over those who do not. Those who are considered proficient have power over others who are helpless. Language becomes a social creation. Identities, relationships, valuation, and normative systems are created in social practices, through language.

**Empirical evidence, method, and implementation of analysis**

This study considers one person who verbally told her memories, her life history or life narrative. A narrative is “*when a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for the later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience*” (Kohler Riessman 2008, p. 3.). The narrative interview took place in the informant’s home and the conversation was audio-recorded and later transcribed. The participant constructed her own narrative, choosing what was to be told and how. She alone decided how she would respond to and how she would perform in the context. In telling such a story, the narrator depicts life events, thus creating the narrative in collaboration with the listener.

As a researcher, my perspective affects my understanding and my research interests almost certainly influence my interpretation of the informant’s life story. When I categorize the informant as a young person, she was eleven when this told story begins and just about twenty when it ends, I am placing her in a group with others whose experiences exhibit certain similar characteristics. My research interests, my way of categorizing, my understanding of what is told and the research questions I have posed are based on and are influenced by my extensive experience meeting young migrants, researchers and my own research in the field. My understanding is grounded in twenty years’ experience as a second-language teacher in primary and secondary schools in Sweden, and as an educator of teachers.

*The life-history approach: Remembered and told events*

Life stories are personal, social, linguistic constructions and re-constructions of memories and evaluations of events. When telling the life story, the story-teller organizes her life story (Kohler Riessman 2008, p. 3.) and by focusing on single events
and managing them, she evaluates and gives meaning to selected parts of life. The stories are therefore subjective descriptions, highlighting events which in some way have been critical for the story-teller. Events selected to be told appear to bear particular significance (Peréz Prieto 2006, pp. 7.). Things that have involved trial or success live on in the memory and appear as turning points in life when people tell their life history.

The story-teller here and now relates events that played out there and then. Telling about one’s life involves therefore both presenting oneself so that one fits in the context and telling something that seems interesting to say to someone. Life stories are constructed by the story-teller who in his turn is influenced by both the receiver and the story situation (Peréz Prieto 2006, pp. 7.). The story situation is therefore crucial to what the story-teller chooses to tell.

The life story considered in this study starts during the late 1930s, ends during the 1940s and was narrated to me nearly seventy years later. One person’s memories of the past have been related in the present. When one is looking back at the past with the present in mind (Freeman 2010) things might be understood in a new way, in new light. Looking back at the past makes it possible to draw conclusions that would not have been possible earlier, and one’s life story is seen in relation to time, history and context. This means that a life-history approach can understood as a puzzle, and narrator must put together the various parts. In this study one person has puzzled out her life history while telling her remembered experiences of leaving and changes to me. I have attempted to understand and learn from this puzzle.

Having a life story approach means that focus is directed towards understanding of people’s reality and experiences of life. With the starting point in a person telling about her life, her life story, and personal memories of her life I interpreted her story as both parts of the complete life story and told memories. Her verbally related and remembered experiences of leaving and changes are interpreted. Those told experiences are analyzed qualitatively. I have thematically identified patterns and variations in the narration in what is called an analysis of selected stories that builds a mosaic or a puzzle (Peréz Prieto 2006, pp. 7.; Kohler Riessman 2008, pp. 53.).

To start with, I read the transcriptions. Then I structured the told in order to reveal themes and see the connections in the texts. I focused on what was described and how the informant presented herself. Then I organized the told thematically and in order to
reach a general understanding of what was told I discuss the re-told story using the previously described theoretical standpoints. The excerpts from the informant’s story have been edited by me but are authentically reproduced here. In the following presentation I have named the informant Anja.

**Leaving and changes**

This section is divided into the four themes; The forced move, Return to the lake house, Beginning again: Emancipation, work and education, Starting over in another country: New job, new language

*The forced move*

Leaving behind the life they knew entailed great adjustment and strains on a family with small children. Anja’s memories reflect what happened when war began and the family realized that they must move away.

*The war had come, so we knew we would be moved any moment. One evening, a bus came to pick us up. Everything happened quickly and merrily. We should have brought food for five days. But dad was sick, so he could not carry anything but his razor in a backpack. Mom had to carry one child, and I took one child, so mom and I could not carry anything but these kids. The other two boys had to carry food for the whole family – mother, father, brothers, and me, seven people. We got dressed in several layers of clothes, as much as we could. Then we ended up in the bus and drove away. We went bit by bit, and our family took over an old cabin that should have been demolished long ago. It was late autumn. Yes, it was December. When we arrived at this cabin, it was full winter. It was a hard winter that year.*

Anja and her family had almost no time to prepare for the evacuation. There was a great strain on all the family members, perhaps especially on the children, because the father was not healthy. When they left, they could carry food and clothing for only a few days. The family was forced embark on a trip to an unknown destination. Their safe home and everything else that had constituted ordinary and normal life were left behind. The forced move changed their life chances and cut off their social relations.

*Return to the lake house*
Four years after the family had left the lake house Anja went back to her former home in Karelia. Conditions were calmer, and she had been told that people who were fit for work could return to what they had abandoned. With the help of friends from before the war, Anja managed to return for a short visit.

*It was in my youth; I was eighteen when I was there. The war was over now, and that’s why I could go back. A man I knew from before arranged for me to go; not just anybody could come. One had to be fit for work. But the day after the place was evacuated. They (the soldiers) had set it on fire. The house had stood in the way and was gone – but the foundation was left, along with the stairs up to the house. And mom’s sewing machine had been in the kitchen window. The iron legs were standing there. The house had not been much over three years old. We’d lived there for three years.*

Anja has clear memories of her return to the site of the family house, as well as of how she got there and back. The recollection of finding the home burned down, with only the lower half of her mother’s sewing machine and the cast foundation and stairs, remained vivid. She also related how worried her friends had been. They did not know where she was, and there were landmines in the area she had moved to. Anja recognized her friends’ concern and realized the danger she exposed them and herself to. Her earlier family home was in an area that was evacuated because wars against the Soviet Union.

**Beginning again: Emancipation, work and education**

The forced move led to a time of uncertainty. Anja did not mention any particular difficulties, but after barely a year on the new homestead resettled by the government, Anja left again. This move entailed separating siblings and parents, and the family split up. Anja left in order to free herself and to reorient herself, making her own way in the new and unknown. That seeking involved several additional breaks from what is familiar.

*When I was fifteen I had to go to my aunt’s. The war was not over, World War II. At night we were bombed, so we had to get up in the middle of the night and go to the bomb shelter. I thought it was such a hassle, and one night I didn’t follow the others. I stayed where my aunt and her family lived. While bombs fell around me, I just slept. I could have died there.*
And then I decided one day... I had an uncle who lived in east central Finland, and I went to him. My uncle’s wife got me a job as a maid on a farm close to them. We worked all day, and while we were working she told me stories. Then I came back to my uncle’s and became a maid there. I felt fine, but I went from their place to other relatives nearby – I think it was a cousin of my mother’s. They were not interested in taking care of me. So I went back to the first aunt and got a job. I had simple jobs because I was so young. And I trained as a fur seamstress and worked as one.

Anja’s break from the family presented opportunities as well as obstacles and hazards. In the story, these moves appear unplanned and seem to have taken place for reasons that were beyond her influence. In the narrative Anja appears helpless and dependent on other people’s good will, yet she also appears brave. The helpless Anja is the young woman whose relatives and other adults do not support her. The brave Anja is the young woman who sets off into the unknown with the help of relatives. From her narrative emerges a brave young woman who tried to arrange her income through various kinds of work. She gained an education and then found employment in her profession.

Starting over in another country: New job, new language

Anja’s story reveals the discomfort she felt. After multiple moves and her return to the lake, Anja moved further away from parents, family and security with them. Nearly six years after the initial evacuation of the house by the lake, she went for a first time to Sweden. It was a short visit.

Then I went to Sweden with the girls [the sisters]. I was in Sweden for two weeks. There was a brother in the family that the girls lived with. They lived in Stockholm, so I could go to their place and stay there for two weeks. So I learned quite a bit of Swedish at that time. I went back to my aunt’s in Helsinki and did various odd jobs. But when I was twenty, I decided to go to Sweden again. A friend of mine, when I was working as a fur seamstress, had an aunt, and her family spoke Swedish. The aunt could not speak Finnish well. My friend got a job in this family. She had to take along a girl as a nanny to their youngest child, a boy of four, and I would read stories to him. And when I pronounced the words wrong, he corrected me. So he
taught me much Swedish, this four-year-old boy. Then I got a job as fur seamstress.

Anja’s second arrival to Sweden was 1945 via Stockholm. Her first contact with Sweden and the new language is described in positive terms. Her establishment in the new country was facilitated by her sisters, who were already there, and by contact with the sisters’ foster family. With the help of a friend who had a job in Sweden, Anja got her first job. To start with Anja lived with this friend. Her establishment in the new environment was also facilitated by the fact that she had learned some Swedish from her sisters. Through her first job and by reading tales to a child, she developed her language skills further and built new social relations. Economically, this meant that she could support herself and take up a place in the new society.

Concluding discussion

This text visualizes my interpretation of remembered and told experiences of leaving and changes. I have asked what this life history communicates about circumstances in which a young person was forced to leave home and orients towards something new. Memories of experiences from long time ago change over time and in the light of new circumstances. Some things are forgotten but those that are remembered and chosen to be told appear as important, as turning points (Bruner 1991; Pérez Prieto 2006), to the narrator. What one chose to tell is depending on the telling situation, the listener and how the narrator will perform. Through telling about the past, Anja constructed herself in the present with the past in mind (Benhabib 2004; Freeman 2010; Kohler Riessman 2008) and her memories were connected with other experiences.

A close reading of Anja’s story makes clear that she related times of both security and insecurity, narrating her own capability and her helplessness. She talked about power, or rather, her lack of power. But the story of orienting herself towards a new life and of her conquest of the unknown visualizes strength and determination. Anja’s story clearly attests the experience of uncertainty about where she belonged as well as her searching for a place where she could feel at home and be accepted.

The experience of a forced migration and of settling into a new community is visible in this narrative. This appears as turning points in her life. Social relations were cut off, and the moves contributed to changes in her life chances. She belonged nowhere and
everywhere (Korppi-Tommola 2008) and she tells us about loss and uncertainty (Torpsten 2008). Anja’s life story tells us about her experience of alienation and uncertainty, ambiguity about where she belonged. It tells us about her ambivalence when she searched for a place where she could feel comfortable and fit in. Alienation and ambivalence (Wigg 2008) are consequences of being forced to leave one’s life behind and start over. Anja’s experiences of alienation resulted in action when she struggled to obtain safety and togetherness. This activity (Wigg 2008) made it possible for her to succeed in new contexts.

After multiple moves and her return to the lake, Anja moved further away from parents, family, and the security of being near them. After some years struggling and searching for a place to settle down Anja established herself in a new environment. When she was no longer escaping from something but moving towards something, she started to decide by herself what to do. While the initial exodus appears to have been a non-decision, the later moves and starting over seem to have resulted from Anja’s own choice, though that choice was dependent on the decisions of others and needs. Moving repeatedly, remaining in constant motion, also appears to be a strategy for dealing with the situation of being forced to flee from home.

Anja’s starting over time in Sweden was to start with a period when peace and tranquility mingled with anxiety, uncertainty, and additional moving around. Anja thrived on her first job but felt compelled to pick up and move on because of discord and the unwillingness of others. This led to a break in her new social relations, a disconnection from her newly established networks. But Anja’s desire was to create opportunity in life so she went on in order to make this possible. This visualizes again a turning point, a before leaving and after leaving her country of origin.

Her work became an important context. There was no Swedish as a second-language and no mother tongue education available or a school for immigrants to Sweden at that time. Her work and her social network became the scenes for learning the new language and keeping up her mother tongue. And her increasing mastering of the new and dominant language opened doors (Milani 2007, Torpsten 2008; Torpsten 2011) into the new society. Her opportunities and potential increased as her skill in Swedish grew. Anja positioned herself as more autonomous through her increased linguistic competence. She increased her social and cultural capital, improved her social positions.
by knowing the dominant language. This example makes clear the importance of language both for success in the workplace and for a migrant’s own well-being.

Cross-border cultures, along with cultural and linguistic variation, due to people’s increasing mobility, are very common in today’s globalized society. Anja has both retained and developed her mother tongue and learned to master the Swedish language. When language affects an individual’s way of thinking, it also affects how she formulates her identity. By switching between different languages, in this case Finnish and Swedish, it is possible to switch between different identities depending on the situation. Ultimately, an individual’s ability to switch identities (Torpsten 2011) to embody both at once, can lead to a third identity that implies the acceptance of participation in different contexts. In this specific context it becomes possible for Anja to take part in at least two language contexts, to play at different language scenes. She was able to switch identities depending on situations. “With languages one can move from one social situation to another.” (de Waal 2012 p 39).

References


