Research Summary

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Ethnic and National Identities: Second- and third-generation Finnish immigrants in the country of ethnic origin

Research on acculturation has often taken place in traditional immigrant-receiving societies, such as Australia, Canada and the United States, but has become increasingly of interest in countries around the world (Berry, 2001). Over recent decades, improved transportation and developments in communications technologies have allowed immigrants and their descendants to reach outside of their local communities and across national boundaries (Lin, Song & Ball-Rokeach, 2010). As Verkuyten (2005) points out, attention must be paid to multiple, hyphenated and hybrid identities as new ways of belonging become possible.

Conducted from a social psychological perspective, my doctoral research looks at ethnic and national cultural identification among second- and third-generation immigrants in the country of ethnic origin. The following question guides my research: How do second- and third-generation Finnish immigrants identify with the Finnish ethnic group/nation and their national group/cultures (e.g., Australian) in Finland?

On an individual level, Berry’s (e.g., 1997, 2002) model of acculturation proposes four strategies from the perspective of minority group members: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. This framework takes into account the individual’s orientation towards non-dominant (ethnic) and dominant (broader host society) cultures. Those that assimilate choose dominant cultural norms, while those that prefer their original culture have a separation orientation. Individuals who identify strongly with both ethnic and national cultures have adopted the integration strategy are bicultural; that is, they maintain ethnic traditions and also move to be an integral part of broader society (Ting-Toomey, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright & Oetzel, 2000).

Phinney (e.g., 1989; 1990; 1992) concentrates on the identity issues in pluralistic cultures. From her approach, ethnic identity is achieved when an individual makes sense of his or her belonging to ethnic culture and experiences a sense of belonging to it. Rather than a result of birth or genetics, ethnic identity is developed through the exploration of what it means to be an ethnic group member in pluralistic society. To Phinney (2002), ethnic identity is fluid and changes over time, content and generations; in a new culture, such changes are a result of acculturation processes.

For many, exploring one’s ethnic identity results in higher levels of psychological adjustment (Phinney, 1989) and well-being (Yip & Fuligni, 2002), as well as holding open attitudes towards others outside the group (Phinney, Jacoby & Silva, 2007). Unexamined ethnic identity may result in negative views of one’s ethnic group being accepted or a lack of understanding of one’s ethnic culture and experience (Phinney, 1989; 1990). Notably, many scholars suggest that ethnic identity may not be considered in isolation of the greater social context. Rather, issues of ethnicity must be considered in the context of the overall social environment (Gong, 2007; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000).
Emigration during the twentieth century has resulted in approximately 1.8 million Finnish ethnic individuals currently living abroad (Koivukangas, 2002)—significant, considering Finland’s current population of 5.3 million. Historically, immigration to Finland has been relatively low, with still only 2.7% of its current population born abroad (based on data from Statistics Finland, 2008). Between 2003-2008, Finland invited its emigrants and their descendants to reclaim their citizenship. According to the Finnish Immigration Service (2009), 21,500 citizenship declarations from emigrants and their descendants were submitted during the five-year timeframe, which highlights an interesting question: are these individuals migrating to Finland, and if so, what are their experiences in doing so?

Previous research on Finnish ethnic repatriates from Russia and Estonia suggests that these individuals experience difficulties in Finland, despite being “fellow ethnics” (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola & Reuter, 2006; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk & Schmitz, 2003) and that perceived discrimination can result in national disidentification and increased attitudes towards the national outgroup (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Solheim, 2009). How do those born in other contexts, such as traditional settler societies, fare? If research shows (Stoller, 1996; Jurva & Jaya, in press) that many second-generation Finnish immigrants often identify only symbolically, how do they identify with their ethnic and national cultural identities in Finland, and do these identifications change over time? How does contact with in- and out-group members play a role in these processes?

The first stage of this research will investigate the pre-migration stage, which has received limited scholarly attention despite being when migrants begin preparations and adaptation for their pending move (Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, in press). Focus groups will be held with Finnish ethnic individuals planning migration to Finland that are participating at a Finnish language and culture course in Finland. Of particular interest at the pre-migration stage are participants’ orientations to the migration, expectations and perspectives on adaptation, and identity issues. Subsequent work will look at post-migration adaptation and identity among these individuals and/or other ethnic migrants returning to Finland.

Once completed, this research will add to the understanding of second- and third-generation immigrant experiences. It will also provide insight into how identification shifts with context and time, from pre-migration to post-migration. This is critical to gaining a more complete picture of identification and adaptation processes across generations, as well as at the pre-migration and post-migration stages. As such, the findings will have implications for immigration policy-makers in Finland and other countries.

References


