



Exploring transnational learning spaces and informal learning processes of migrants

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Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tarkastella siirtolaisten oppimisprosesseja yllirajaisissa ympäristöissä ja näissä muodostuvia yllirajaisia oppimistiloja. Väitöstutkimus keskittyi erityisesti Suomen ja Viron välillä liikkuvien siirtolaisten ja maahanmuuttajien kokemuksiin. Tutkimusaineisto (78 puolistrukturoitua haastattelua ja 20 elämäkertahaastattelua) kerättiin Suomessa TRANS-NET- tutkimusprojektissa (2008-2011). Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin laadullisen, teoriaohjaavan sisällönanalyysin avulla. Tutkimuksessa sovellettiin sosiokulttuuriseen oppimiseen ja yllirajaisuustutkimukseen liittyviä teorioita ja käsitteitä. Tutkimuksessa nousi esiin kolme laajaa yllirajaista oppimisympäristöä: yllirajainen

perhetila, yllirajainen ammatillinen tila ja yllirajainen yhteiskunnallinen tila. Nämä rajat ylittävät, sosiaalisesti rakentuneet tilat yhdistivät kahdessa tai useammassa eri yhteiskunnassa asuvat tai asuneet henkilöt. Siirtolaisten keskeisiä oppimisprosesseja yllirajaisissa ympäristöissä olivat käsitusten ja toimintatapojen erojen tunnistaminen, erilaisten uskomusten ja tapojen vertailu, oman sosiokulttuurisen taustan reflektio, uusien ideoiden, toimintatapojen ja ajattelutapojen omaksuminen ja jakaminen yli kansallisten rajojen sekä identiteetin rakentuminen erilaisten yhteisöjen jäsenyyksien kautta.

Avainsanat: *informaali oppiminen, maahanmuuttajat, yllirajainen tila, siirtolaisuus*

Introduction

International migration has recently become more diversified. People are crossing national borders for different reasons. For example, people are moving to another country to work, to study, to get married, to set up in business or to escape war or environmental disasters. Some migrants are looking for a more rewarding life-style at a foreign destination. Migration is not always a permanent move from one country to another. Migrants may stay for some months or years in the receiving country and then return to their country of origin, or they may move to yet another country. There are also transmigrants moving back and forth between countries. For example, tens of thousands of people have been moving between Finland and Estonia in recent years. People have been transmigrating in particular to work in one country while still having family members living in another. (Järvinen-Alenius et al. 2010) Because both Finland and Estonia are now European Union Member States, free mobility of people is supported by legislation and administrative arrangements. Concerning the Estonia-Finland transnational space, there have been migrants moving in both directions. Most of these people have moved from Estonia to Finland but there have also been, for example, Finnish labour migrants, students and entrepreneurs moving to Estonia (Jakobson et al. 2012). In Finland, the Estonians now form the largest group of foreign residents and recent estimates of Estonian transmigrants in Finland have varied between forty and sixty thousand (Alenius 2015; Finnish immigration service 2015; Jakobson & Kalev 2013).

Nowadays migrants often have close socio-cultural, political and economic relations and ties to two or more societies, including both countries of immigration and emigration. Due to the rapid development of information and communication technologies, migrants can maintain connections across national borders and follow societal developments in several nation-states more easily than they could few decades ago. Migrants have maintained their transnational contacts across borders through diverse activities, such as, transferring money, maintaining online communication, providing care, supporting political associations, or conveying professional information to non-migrants living in the countries of origin. (Cuban 2014; Faist et al. 2013; Vertovec 2009) New technologies make it easy for migrants to follow news in their country of origin and also the daily lives of their relatives and friends. It is easy to send messages, share photos and videos through social media or engage in discussions even with people living on the other side of the globe.

Migration research and also debates on migration often focus on the receiving countries. For example, here in Finland, there has been discussion on how increasing immigration flows affect Finnish society, or on how migrants integrate into Finland. However, transnational migration studies have drawn attention to the effects of international migration on both countries of immigration and emigration and how one should adopt a transnational perspective to explore migration (for example, Faist et al. 2013; Vertovec 2009). Transnational studies have investigated the cross-border activities of migrants and how close interaction connects migrants living in the host society with non-migrants liv-

ing in the migrants' former home countries. These studies have drawn attention to the cross-border flows of ideas, money, and goods, and to how people's lives and their communities have been transformed through intensive transnational interaction (Levitt 2001; Pitkänen et al. 2012). In these studies, researchers have used concepts such as transnational spaces, transnational social fields or transnational circuits.

The words 'transnational' or 'transnational space' may sound alien and abstract to those not familiar with these perspectives. Yet for migrants, such as the informants of this doctoral study (Alenius 2015), these issues were connected to their everyday lives and experiences in relation, for example, to their family lives, social activities or to their experiences in different kinds of work communities. What could living in a transnational setting mean, in practice, for a migrant? In my study, I focused on the experiences of people who had migrated from Estonia to Finland or were transmigrating between the two countries. One of the interviewees reported that she did not see Finland and Estonia as two separate states but rather forming one unity. Another interviewee described how she spent one week each month in Estonia and the rest of the time in Finland. She explained how moving to and fro between these countries was particularly important for her identity and well-being, and she would probably continue balancing between the two countries for the rest of her life because she had relatives on both sides of the Gulf of Finland. On the other hand, for Russian speaking informants, maintaining close ties to the Russian speaking world and relatives living in these areas was an important part of their everyday lives in transnational settings.

In educational research, transnational perspectives are still rather new and little explored, and the focus has mainly been on examining the learning of migrants and migrants' integration paths from the perspective of the receiving societies (Guo 2013; Waters and Brooks 2012). While there is a large body of research on the transnational networks and border-crossing activities of migrants, there are only few studies examining migrants' learning experiences from transnational perspectives.

The aim of this dissertation (Alenius 2015) was to explore the learning processes of migrants in transnational settings and the emerging transnational spaces of learning. The research questions were: 1) What kinds of informal learning environments emerge in transnational settings, particularly concerning migrants between Estonia and Finland? 2) What are the characteristics of transnational learning processes from migrants' perspectives? 3) How are conceptions and practices shared in transnational learning environments? The research data included 78 semi-structured and 20 life-course interviews conducted in Finland during the TRANS-NET project (see Pitkänen et al. 2012). I analysed the interview data qualitatively, following theory-guided content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009) in which theoretical concepts provided insights for the interpretation of the data collected. I combined theoretical perspectives and concepts from transnational migration studies and from situated learning theory (in particular, Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

The key idea of socio-cultural, situated learning tradition for this dissertation is how people learn and develop their iden-

tities through engaging in the activities of different kinds of social groups and communities throughout their lives. By participating in the activities of different groups, people can adopt new ideas, skills and behaviours. They can also act as brokers introducing new ideas and habits from one group to another (Wenger 1998). Social learning environments are not necessarily harmonious communities; instead, disagreements, conflicts, and power differentials are often a part of these (for example, Lave & Wenger 1991). Moreover, broader historical, economic, and socio-cultural developments and related struggles shape local learning communities and the on-going identity construction of individuals (Holland & Lave 2009).

Results

In my study, I identified three main, broad transnational learning environments: transnational family space, transnational occupational space and transnational civic space. These border-crossing, socially constructed spaces connected people residing or having resided in two or more different societies. I examined the structure of these spaces on macro, meso and micro level. Macro-level factors included international, regional and national policies, administrative regulations as well as the socio-cultural and political development of societies. On the meso level, families, work communities, non-governmental organisations and transnational networks, for example, provided arenas in which both migrants and non-migrants had the opportunity to engage in situated learning processes in their everyday lives in a transnational setting. On the micro level, individuals had diverse learning trajectories and experiences in transnational environments.

The informants had identified differences in occupational and social conceptions and practices, compared different beliefs and behaviours, and adopted new ideas, behaviours and mindsets. They had also reflected on their own socio-cultural heritage and had constructed their identities through social engagements. Some of the informants had been acting as transnational brokers (cf. Wenger 1998) by mediating and interpreting information, skills and practices, for example, between families, work organisations and associations located in different countries. The informants had shared conceptions and practices related to societal and occupational issues, gender orders as well as cultural traditions with their non-migrant relatives, friends, and colleagues. Yet differences in the politico-historical development of societies created barriers between the individuals and groups complicating such exchanges.

This study aims to provide a new perspective to examine migrants' informal learning processes in transnational environments. Instead of applying intercultural learning theories, for example, I explored cross-border learning encounters from the perspectives of situated learning research and transnational studies. This study shows how migrants' lives are often embedded in at least two societies, and how the learning experiences of migrants are shaped by the historical development of these societies, and by the social groups and communities they have engaged in throughout their life-course. Both migrants and non-migrants can adopt and share new ideas and practices as well as construct their identities through their engagement in various social groups both within a nation-state and across national borders. Furthermore, mobile individuals have diverse learning paths and expe-

riences in transnational spaces throughout their life-course. The learning experiences in at least two different societal systems and membership of different social groups and communities in at least two countries provided opportunities for the informants to compare and reflect on diverse societal, occupational and socio-cultural traditions, practices and conceptions.

Discussion

International migration is increasing worldwide, and as stated, migrants can now more easily maintain transnational connections. It is important to understand how migrants' experiences, learning processes and orientation are not necessarily limited to the host society. In addition, not only migrants but also many non-migrants are involved in different kinds of transnational learning environments in their everyday lives.

For professionals in education, it is insightful to understand how migrants often have transnational orientation, ties and diverse cross-border activities, and how these shape their family lives, societal activities, and future options. In different fields of education, educators and educational institutions should better acknowledge the skills and understanding which migrants have acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings. In particular, adult migrants' familiarity with different educational, occupational and societal contexts could provide fresh perspectives through which to explore local practices and suggest alternative ways of conduct.

Due to increasing international labour mobility, work environments are becoming more diversified, consisting of work-

ers with diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. Therefore, one can ask, how education could foster people's competencies to work in transnational and multicultural work environments. In this research it was noted how the migrants had fostered different dimensions of transnational competence (Koehn & Rosenau 2010) through cross-border cooperation and interaction in their everyday lives at work, in social activities and in kinship networks. Therefore, one could consider how in education similar learning environments and encounters could be created: for example, through international virtual courses or bi-nationally organised intensive courses students could obtain experiences of engaging in shared activities with others across national borders. Furthermore, in such transnational, educational environments both students and teachers could gain opportunities to compare and analyse differences in educational, societal and socio-cultural traditions and practices. In this way, non-mobile students could also gain experience in transnational collaboration and learning during their studies.

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