Meanings of ethnicity among young people

Background

Antti Kivijärvi is a social scientist from the University of Eastern Finland. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the social integration of young immigrants into leisure-time activities in Finland, and the book, which is based on the thesis, consists of the original four articles together with a concluding analysis. Kivijärvi interviewed youth with immigrant backgrounds and their Finnish peers, and he also took part in youth worker groups during his fieldwork. The majority of the ethnographic material consists of multi-cited ethnography, during which time Kivijärvi observed and interviewed young people and youth workers in three different localities. The places are separate from each other in relation to their degree of multiculturality: big cities (the capital area in Finland) are typically most heterogeneous and multicultural, whereas other urban areas, such as suburbs or small towns in Eastern/Northern Finland have only a few immigrants when he did his research. This multi-sitedness is seen through-

out the research process, and Kivijärvi uses the fieldwork material together with the interviews to prove the analysis.

Kivijärvi writes that the articles and analysis reflect the research process, which he developed over the course of several years: he has started from the point where he had no knowledge of the topic, and later on he was able to go deeper into youth culture. The growth towards the concluding parts of the thesis is seen in the topics discussed and his practical understanding of the youth and ethnicity.

Kivijärvi's four articles discuss the material from different perspectives. The first two articles concentrate on peer and group relations among the youth. He examines such relations through the categories of ethnicity, class and social environment. The second article also examines the quality of peer affiliations and bonds. The third article discusses the opinions of youth workers in relation to ethnicity: how leisure-time activities can be used to break down ethnic boundaries and diminish segregation. The fourth article focuses on the existing practices and discourses when working with young people.

Concept of ethnicity

Kivijärvi's main concept and the focus of the research is ethnicity and its place in group dynamics.

Ethnicity is commonly examined as a basic factor that creates differences between two groups of people: an ethnic group - and our understanding of it – is seen as a primary unit for group identity, one that racially or culturally separates one group from other groups or peoples (Barth, Fredrik 1969. Introduction. In Barth, Fredrik (ed.), Et*hnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 9–38.). Kivijärvi uses Barth's idea of ethnicity as a socially constructed marker, one which is used to create and maintain differences (pp. 29–30; see also Brubaker, Rogers 2004. *Ethnicity without groups.* Harvard: Harvard University Press, p. 8). Among the young people that he examined, ethnicity is present as a means of segregation and boundary-making when young people come to the youth houses and centres

(nuorisotalo), organise teams for games or create unofficial friendships. These forms of segregation are expressed, for example, through behaviour, speech and spatial and bodily practices. Kivijärvi's research material is vast, and it is sometimes difficult to see how often ethnicity is actually spoken or expressed verbally, but is seems clear that it influences the practices at youth centres and free-time friendships.

Kivijärvi writes that ethnicity works as a super-status, which seems to overcome all other categories in his material (pp. 31–34), and even if its importance varies according to the environment and social group, Kivijärvi argues that the idea of inter-sectionalism is not applicable to his study (p. 33). This is an important point in his study: ethnicity is in fact the most important factor that creates the separation and sense of belonging among the examined youth. At the same time that it creates gaps between the groups, it may have a positive side. It may help youth from an immigrant background have a meaningful identity, something to be proud of, as it is manifested in sub-cultures and in practices or forms of mutual trust that differ from those found among mainstream Finns: for example, use of alcohol is seen as a negative Finnish habit, and the difficult, discriminating experiences surrounding it can be shared only with those from a similar background.

Affiliations

Peer affiliations and group contacts are the most important factors that seem to organise the lives of the youth, and social integration can be seen as one of the most important parts of youth integration (pp. 19–21). In practice, this does not seem to work without problems. Peer acceptance, social contact and all affiliations with other people are dependent on the ethnic or social groups the young have become a part of. So even if a shift from one social or ethnic group to another is possible, it does not happen commonly or so easily. Kivijärvi's study shows that organised leisure-time activities that are aimed at diminishing differences can in actual practice help maintain group divisions and serve as a means for categorising such behaviour. Gender and ethnicity may create roles and separate places that are difficult to overcome,

and this is present especially in the larger cities in the capital area, where it is typical that neighbourhoods and suburbs are divided socially and ethnically. In this case, it is common that young people connect to their local area, not to their nationality or background, and this is one possible way they may ultimately overcome ethnicity. This is examined through the concept of 'neighbourhood nationalism' (p. 86; see Back, Les 1996. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture. Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives.* London: Routledge, pp. 49–72).

This means of overcoming ethnic groups is typically seen in urban areas where cities are already multicultural and heterogeneous, but according to Kivijärvi's material it is not clear that heterogeneous areas would be the best for newcomers: in rural environments, the mixing with people from a Finnish background is more profound, as ethnicity is not based on group identities but is dealt with on an individual level. A more homogeneous, rural environment can be thus both good and a problem for those young immigrants who do not have many people from the same ethnicity to associate with in the area (pp. 92–94): Kivijärvi argues that urban areas, where the ethnic peer groups and neighbourhoods already exist, do not offer many choices for newcomers, but that rural areas provide more possibilities for mixing with local Finnish peers.

Kivijärvi shows that ethnicity is widely present in young people's group behaviour, and it has different meanings in official and in leisure-time social activities. These so-called weak and strong ties refer to contacts that people have either at an institutional level (work, school) and on a personal level (e.g. friendship, marriage) (see also Granovetter, Mark 1973. 'The strength of weak ties'. *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6), 1360–1380.). It is typically assumed that so-called 'weak ties' at school, in peer groups or in working places would also increase interaction between groups in unofficial situations, but this does not seem to occur among the youth in Kivijärvi's research. Even when the young people had contact with one another in organised situations, they chose to stay in their own ethnic groups on other occasions, and the avoidance of others outside the group was strong. The widest and the most flexible inter-

ethnic connections in the material were achieved by the so-called 'bridge-builders' (compare Grannovetter 1973), individuals who managed to live in two roles: they might be the children of multi-ethnic families, or those particular young people who had a partner from another ethnic group. These changing roles gave bridge builders the possibility to balance between two different groups and at the same time increase the contacts between them. Kivijärvi's study shows that the bonds between youth with an immigrant background and their Finnish peers seem to be changing, though slowly; ultimately, the picture that Kivijärvi provides us with has multiple possibilities for the future.

Practical perspectives

In the end, Kivijärvi summarise his work and offers some glimpses into the future of youth work and counselling. According to his material, it is obvious that the process of creating social bonds is a sensitive issue, one which is not easy thing for youth or social workers to deal with in a practical sense. For instance, how should young people verbalise the problems that they are experiencing and how should someone try to put a stop to the racist or stereotypical divisions that might exist in the field?

When a youth centre tries to support certain minority groups, or certain age groups, or even certain boys or girls, they are at the same time marginalising others. Kivijärvi observed in his study that all the organised youth centres mainly target boys between the ages of 13 and 17, and according to Kivijärvi's material, both ethnicity and gender play a big role in creating official spaces. For example, there are not many possibilities for Afghan girls to take part in such centres, and the activities of Finnish or Afghan boys were strongly divided into separate groups, even if they shared in some of the same activities when there was no other option. Ethnic overlap does occur at times, but as mentioned above, such points of overlap mostly had to do with individuals who have an ability to cross the boundary.

Conclusion

One of the most important conclusions of the research is that young people need peer accept-

ance and a sense of social togetherness. This can be expressed through shared ethnicity, as in Kivijärvi's study, or it can take the form of neighbourhood pride. The shared sense of a meaningful future and social acceptance are the key factors for helping young immigrants both in urban and rural areas. For youth workers, this may seem like a difficult task, and hopefully the study will give new information for practical fieldwork as well. In the future, it would be interesting to obtain more precise information about the intersections of social class, gender and education in relation to the results provided by Kivijärvi.

The study challenges some basic assumptions about integration and ethnicity, thus providing a good new research perspective. For example, the weak affiliations do not necessarily strengthen immigrants' integration process, and the role of ethnicity in youth culture is strongly dependent on locality. Even if the biggest, most multicultural cities may at first seem the most tolerate places for new immigrants, Kivijärvi's study shows that smaller towns often offer better possibilities for full integration. In rural areas, groups of young people from different ethnic backgrounds do not live apart from each other, and deeper ethnic overlaps can occur on an individual level. In that way, Kivijärvi's research gives a promising glimpse into problems and how to solve them within multicultural communities.

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