

Playfulness and Freedom of Choice in Matters of Belonging

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Dorothea Breier 2017. *The Vague Feeling of Belonging of a Transcultural Generation. An Ethnographic Study on Germans and their Descendants in Contemporary Helsinki, Finland*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. 250 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-51-3811-8 (paperback). ISBN 978-951-51-3812-5 (PDF).

Dorothea Breier's dissertation "The Vague Feeling of Belonging of a Transcultural Generation. An Ethnographic Study on Germans and their Descendants in Contemporary Helsinki" (2017) focuses on Germans and their descendants in Finland. Breier explores in her monograph how they (de)construct boundaries between German- and Finnishness by simultaneously drawing on national categories and challenging the same moments later. She also examines the ways in which people position themselves within such frameworks, and what impact this self-assertion has on individuals and their lives. While Breier's focus is on the descendants of Germans in contemporary Helsinki, the study highlights the importance of taking into consideration the intergenerational, societal and historic context when exploring the descendant generation's views, emotional experiences and behaviour.

Discussions in the media and academia often focus on problematic cases of integration by singling out groups with "exotic" backgrounds and exploring experiences of racism and bias in the receiving society, or they tend to position migrants as uprooted and torn between countries and cultures. The status of a certain group of foreigners or immigrants in a country depends on the extent of difference/familiarity they evoke in the population of the host country. In the case of Germans in Finland, the long tradition of cultural contact and a (predominantly) good relationship between both countries have assisted in rendering them an invisible group of migrants. Breier's study is highly topical amid the recent discussions on migration caused by the refugee crisis in 2015. Although she focuses on a small group of "inconspicuous" migrants, she manages to offer insights into a variety of complex and fundamental issues related to belonging. Her study connects to recent works in the fields of mobility and migration studies, including research on intra-European mobility, bi/multilingual and transnational families or Third/Cross Culture Kids that help to open the scope of research to cover various trends of mobility and movement as well as affected groups of people or individuals.

The main source of the dissertation (altogether 250 pages in length) consists of 32 qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Breier conducted nine interviews with 1st generation Germans who had no previous family connection before moving to Finland and 23 interviews with the descendant generation who had an extended “German horizon” (in terms of family background, languages, socialisation, stays, food, holiday tradition, etc.). By chance, she also managed to include three fathers and their sons among the interviewees, which enabled her to contrast the experiences, feelings and ideas between generations in the analysis. Her ethnographic study draws primarily on the concepts of transculturality, hybridity and belonging, and she manages to connect her main theoretical and methodological framework to empirical examples and to present the source literature related to her study in a competent way. Unfortunately, Breier is a little less diligent in her bibliographic references to original works that she mentions in her thesis. For instance, when she quotes Stuart Hall she refers to a secondary source instead of the original (p. 186), or instead of Deutsch *et al.* 1957 she only mentions “Deutsch’s transactionalist theory (1957)” (p. 208), although the original source was correctly indicated in the secondary literature. Although Breier uses a broad range of recent literature, predominantly in German and English but also including some Swedish and Finnish publications, I would have expected to find more studies focusing on intra-European mobility complementing the literature mentioned in the thesis.

In the methodological part, Breier reflects on the study’s emic perspective and the impacts of her subjective positioning on her research in terms of an ethnographer as a German who moved to Helsinki to write her PhD thesis. Without going into depth, I would like to add that I enjoyed reading the description of Breier’s system for coding the participants (pp. 37–38). This part is a good example that proves particularly to young researchers, that it is possible to have an original and thoughtful approach to participant data, which at the same time is also a “fun activity”.

At first, I was slightly puzzled by Breier’s unexpected choice of the term “descendants” in the title and her use of “descendants of Germans” or “descendant generation” in the text. However, Breier provides a good discussion on why she finally settled for these terms and critically remarks that the terms she chose did not necessarily reflect ideally what she intended to say. She explains that her interviewees did not represent only 2nd or 3rd generation Germans in terms of adult children of German couples who had spent the majority of their socialisation in Finland. Her study includes adult children of Finnish-German mixed couples, no matter whether they had been raised in Finland or Germany, as long as they lived in Finland at the time of the interview. She also interviewed a person with two Finnish parents and German so-

cialisation who had moved to Finland only as an adult, as well as adults with one German or one mixed German-Finnish grandparent.

Breier's struggle to find the right terms to describe these succeeding generations of Germans (or people with a German connection) in Finland actually highlights a very important issue that is often neglected in the field of migration and mobility studies, transnationalism or family studies. Too often, researchers still use concepts easily describing certain constellations without reflecting whether the concepts correspond to people's self-attribution or to the super-diversity of the groups of people examined. The commonly used terms do not disclose any information concerning the people's subjective positioning or belonging but actually, on the contrary, can contribute to create an artificial gap between different groups in society. Terms such as 1st, 2nd and/or 3rd generation migrant evoke associations of homogeneous groups, and their use raises the question of when a migrant is still a migrant and when s/he becomes a part of society. Moreover, the lack of adequate terms shows how underrepresented people with super-diverse and mobile backgrounds are in public perception. Breier's reflections laudably anticipate a desirable discussion of the terms used in academia and the media to do justice to the complexity of belonging and to raise awareness of the impact of such labelling.

One of Breier's key findings relates to the German descendants' "freedom of choice", or the freedom of not having to choose between Finland and Germany, which enables them to express a feeling of belonging not in terms of "either-or" but rather in terms of "as well as" or even "neither-nor". However, to present the German migrants' and their descendants' ways of negotiating their ties and their sense of belonging as an optional 'choice not to choose' (p. 233) depicts some sort of passivity in their agency, which is not what Breier's findings actually imply. Instead, they allude to the participants' active and constant negotiation with their social environment rather in terms of a "personal choice of what to choose, when, in which context and for what reason", as I would suggest also based on my personal experience with similar negotiations. Although the understanding of difference is a central aspect of mobility experiences, only recent studies refer to a positive notion of "playing with difference", for instance among people with mixed and multilingual backgrounds. Breier introduces her original concept of "mobile mindset" in her final chapter. This concept essentially describes the impact mobility can have on the mentality and personality of a person, including a playful dealing with her belonging. I find this approach useful and believe that it could serve as an interesting conceptual framework for future works on mobility and belonging, challenging concepts of national identities.

Her final chapter provides answers to the relevance of this study. I agree with Breier that we need to contextualise and contrast different specific case studies to gain a better understanding of the complexity of belonging and the impact of mobility on people. Doing research on less visible groups such as Germans in Finland that represent the “more similar other” is important for taking out the heat and fear in the current discussions about migration and integration. Studies such as Breier’s show the impact of social, historical and cultural entanglements on people’s personal interconnectedness in the world, thereby raising awareness that it is possible to embrace different cultural frameworks and to be rooted in several places that all represent home. In turn, this will hopefully help increase empathy and understanding towards other migrant groups with a more “exotic” background and counteract nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies in society. I highly recommend Breier’s dissertation. Her study is a relevant contribution to future research and is written in an easily comprehended style, which makes it accessible even to non-scholars, including the growing number of mobile people and their offspring.

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