

# Lectio

## Negotiating the 'migrant elite': Boundary making and social identities among skilled migrants in Finland

*Kaisu Koskela*

Tiivistelmä tutkimuksesta:

**V**äitöskirjatutkimukseni käsittelee Suomessa asuvien korkeasti koulutettujen maahanmuuttajien sosiaalisia identiteettejä, ryhmien välisiä rajoja ja kuulumi- sen tunnetta. Korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat mielletään ensisijaisesti länsimaalaiseksi, korkean sosioekonomisen statuksen omaavaksi 'maahanmuuttajaeliitiksi'. Tutkimukseni lähtökohtana on, että he ovat silti myös maahanmuuttajia ja sosiaalisia toimijoita, joilla on samankaltaisia kotoutumiseen, sopeutumiseen ja osallisuuteen liittyviä ongelmia kuin muillakin maahanmuuttajilla. Väitöskirjan aineisto on kerätty etnografisena kenttätyönä, jota tein korkeasti koulutettujen maahanmuuttajien parissa Helsingissä. Lisäksi tein 15 syventävää teema- haastattelua. Keskeisin tutkimuskysymykseni on: *Miten korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat löytävät ja määrittävät itselleen paikkaa yhteiskunnan rakenteissa asettuaan Suomeen?* Lisäksi esitän kysymyksiä luokkastatuksen, etnisyyden ja sukupuolen merkityksistä, sekä siitä, miten korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat rakentavat ryhmärajojaan ja sosiaalisia identiteettejään vuorovaikutuksessa muihin.

Tutkimuksen tulokset on esitetty neljässä vertaisarvioidussa artikkelissa. Artikkelit etenevät makro-tason rakenteellisten näkökohtien

kuvauksesta (artikkelit I ja II) meso-tason vuorovaikutusprosesseihin (artikkelit II ja III) ja mikro-tason toimijuuden tarkasteluun (artikkeli IV). Artikkeleissa esitetyt tulokset kertovat, että huolimatta korkeasti koulutettujen maahanmuuttajien etuoikeutetummas- ta sosioekonomisesta asemasta ja usein kansainvälisestä työympäristöstä, he altistuvat rodullistaville diskursseille, stereotyypioille ja maahanmuuttajiin kohdistuville asenteille arkielämässään. Etenkin rodullistetut korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat kokevat, että heidän oletetaan olevan turvapaikanhakijoita tai pakolaisia ja että heidät kategorisoidaan negatiivisen maahanmuuttajakuvauksen mukaan kouluttamattomiksi alempien yhteiskuntaluokkien edustajiksi. Samalla heidän oma sosiaalinen ryhmäidentiteettinsä perustuu ensisijaisesti jaettuun korkeaan luokkastatukseen, sekä positiivisesti miellettyyn kansainvälisyyteen ja ulkomaalaisuuteen. Tämän itsemääritellyn ryhmäidentiteetin ja heidän ulkopuolisilta kokemansa kategorisoinnin välillä on ristiriita, jota yritetään ratkoa rajanvedoilla ja identiteettistrategioilla, jotka tähtäävät heidän näkemiseensä positiivisemmassa valossa. Osa näistä rajanvedoista pohjautuu toiseuttamiseen, joka paradoksaalisesti vahvistaa niitä hierarkkisia rakennelmia ja rodullistamisprosesseja, joita tutkimuksen kohteet sanovat vastustavansa. Kaiken kaikkiaan, tutkimuksen

tulokset korostavat sosiaaliluokan ja etnisyyden jatkuvaa ja keskeistä intersektionaalisuutta korkeasti koulutettujen maahanmuuttajien elämässä Suomessa.

Vastauksena tutkimuskysymykseeni päätellen, että korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat eivät koe, että he olisivat lähtökohtaisesti ta- savertaisia jäseniä suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa. Siksi he etsivät kuuluvuuden tunnetta 'kansainvälisestä rinnakkaisyhteiskunnasta' Suomessa, joka koostuu muista korkeasti koulutetuista maahanmuuttajista ja kansainvälistyneistä suomalaisista. Sen sijaan, että he kotoutuisivat suomalaiseen yhteiskuntaan sen asettamalla ehdoilla, heidän sopeutumisensa on jatkuva neuvotteluprosessi yhteiskunnallisten rakenteiden ja henkilökohtaisen toimijuuden välillä: suomalaisten maahanmuuttajiin kohdistuvien asenteiden ja heidän oman ymmärryksensä välillä siitä, mikä on heidän arvonsa osana kansainvälistyvää yhteiskuntaa.

Lectio

**M**y dissertation is titled “Negotiating the ‘migrant elite’: Boundary making and social identities among skilled migrants in Finland”. In its essence, it is about the everyday experiences and social life of skilled migrants living in Finland. I became interested in this topic and in this type of migrant due to my own experiences as a member of similar multicultural, international social groups elsewhere. For a decade of my life, I studied and worked in several European countries, moving from country to country for adventure, new experiences, and the sheer thrill of being somewhere else than in the cold dark North that was uncomfortably familiar to me.

Many roads led me to study Migration and Ethnic Studies at the University of Amsterdam, where course after course, we delved into the lives of migrants who seemed invariably to be racialized, ethnicized, lower-class subjects. As insightful as it was, already then I wondered where the stories of those like me were.

Moving to another country because of personal wants is a very different experience than moving for economic need or even sheer survival, but I nonetheless always felt I, too, was a migrant, a foreigner, the Other. Granted, as a white European, I blended into the streetscape of the countries I lived in, and I had the financial means of making a comfortable life for myself. Personally, I also enjoyed the curiosity that my Otherness would evoke, probably because I always felt it to be positive. Yet, this Otherness contributed to how I saw myself as part of a bigger whole, as a foreigner in someone else’s land.

My migrant identity was that of an educated, well-to-do, white Finn, moving in Europe without border restrictions. This was an experience far removed from the descriptions of the migrants in the course-books of my studies.

After I returned to my native Finland, I found myself missing the international, multicultural social circles I had become accustomed to during those years. I found them in the many social clubs in Helsinki organising activities varying from drinks at a bar to sporting events to business networking directed at a multicultural audience in English. The activities of these clubs were largely attended by skilled migrants and a mix of other Finns like me who longed for connections outside of our fellow countrymen.

These social events became the bases of the dissertation research I had embarked on on my return. Having lived through both the joys and difficulties of relocating into a new country and new socio-cultural surroundings many times myself, I was interested in how the skilled migrants’ experiences of living in Finland, among Finnish people, as particular type of positively viewed migrants, affected their social identities, sense of belonging and group boundaries.

The dissertation is based on empirical data gathered over 4½ years of ethnographic fieldwork among skilled migrants living in Helsinki, largely at the events organised by these social clubs. It was a familiar surroundings, yet the findings would prove to be surprisingly unfamiliar from my own experiences as a migrant. Together with my research participants we would socialize at cafes complaining about the Finnish weather, share a drink

at an Irish pub after a language exchange, take part in international film festivals, seek out exotic food stands at restaurant day, and celebrated Chinese new year, Halloween and St Patrics’s day, alongside all the Finnish celebrations. While I stress in my research that skilled migrants do indeed live their lives in a social world that is very much located in Finland geographically, politically and structurally, these social activities also offered another dimension to life in Finland through the cosmopolitan reach of the international cultural experiences.

At the time, both academic research as well as political discussion about skilled migration was heavily focused on its economic impact, and on how to attract more of this global talent into Finland in the first place. However, the social life of skilled migrants outside of their workplace was receiving little attention, and the assumption seemed to be that they had no trouble adapting into their new lives in Finland. After all, they had jobs and secure financial situations, which were the primary concerns for the government’s integration policies. Also, they were mostly from other Western countries, and therefore not expected to struggle with understanding the local culture, apart from perhaps needing some guidance on how to behave in the sauna.

Indeed, in much of research, policy planning as well as in popular imagination, skilled migrants are portrayed as white, Western, well-to-do ‘migrant elite’, who easily slot into any new surroundings that they find themselves in. I myself also use this term of the ‘migrant elite’ in

the title of my dissertation, although I do so in inverted commas.

The inverted commas, I must admit, were not there in the beginning. As my research progressed, however, I started to discover the heterogeneity of the people under the title skilled migrants: people of all ethnicities and nationalities, of various professions and income brackets, of all genders and ages, and of multitude of different life circumstances that had led them to Finland. I added the inverted commas to draw attention to the erroneous idea of the homogeneity of this group, and to the somewhat naive notion that any migration experience could be as straightforward and easy for individuals as the discussion on skilled migrants as a 'migrant elite' would have us believe.

My research adopts the perspective that despite their often privileged socio-economic status, skilled migrants are indeed also migrants, people who have come to live in Finland from other countries. They live very much within the context of Finnish society rather than in an 'expat bubble' supposed by much of previous research, and as such are subject to the same categorizing and stereotyping processes as other migrants.

Focusing on skilled migrants' social life outside of the workplace, the main research question I ask is: *In their process of settling in in Finland, how do skilled migrants find and define a place for themselves within the structures of their new host society?* In addition, I ask questions about the strategies of identity negotiations, the role of class and ethnicity for skilled migrants' social identities, and how their own group identity is defined in relation to others around them.

I approach these questions from the perspective of interactionist identity theories concerned with the ways in which identities are not only internalized self-definitions, but also include definitions imposed by others. A conceptual distinction of 'group' versus 'category' is a central interactionist idea that follows throughout my research. A conflict between one's own group definition of themselves and how others categorize them is what leads to a need for identity re-negotiations for these conflicting definitions to meet.

In addition, I adopted an intersectional perspective later in the research to further explore the heterogeneity within the group. Many skilled migrants do not readily fit the image of the 'migrant elite' portrayed as white, male, Western expatriates. Identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, and age intersect in different ways creating a multitude of varying experiences of being a skilled migrant in Finland. While the interactionist identity theories turn our focus on the negotiations of group boundaries, an intersectional focus points to the heterogeneity that exists within these boundaries. Both were of interest to me, and both proved to be fruitful avenues of investigation.

The findings of the research are presented in four peer-reviewed articles. They span a timeline of 10 years, the first article having been published already in 2010 while the last of the four articles is awaiting print currently and will be out later this autumn. The articles offer a continuous line of thought from macro-level structural considerations in the context of Finland to meso-level interactional processes and finally to micro-level res-

ponses and agency of the skilled migrants themselves.

The structural level context consists of the attitudes, stereotypes and categorizations that the skilled migrants encounter in their host society. I conceptualize these in the idea of a 'migrant hierarchy', a scale of categorizations based on how migrants are valued and evaluated in Finland. Previous research shows that Finns value migrants who have high education and employment status, and those that come into the country for work or educational purposes over humanitarian reasons. On a scale related to ethnicity, Finns are most welcoming towards migrants from other Western countries, and the least accepting of those coming from Africa or the Middle-East.

As a simplification, the most appreciated type of migrants are therefore highly-skilled, highly-employed, white migrants from familiar cultures. They are in many ways portrayed as the ideal type of migrant, who are seen as welcomed, positive additions to the country economically, as well as the nation culturally. At the bottom end of the hierarchy is the category of unskilled, unappreciated, humanitarian migrants from non-Western countries with visible ethnicities. They are associated with the negative view of immigration flows as a threat to national culture and a burden on the economy.

However, this hierarchy is an elusive, sliding scale, and its categorizations exist more in people's minds than in real life. Especially those individuals that I met out in the field who were highly-skilled professionals, but came from non-Western countries or had racialized ethnicities, did not readily

fit any of the categories. Furthermore, they were not experiencing their lives in Finland to be that of appreciated, wanted professionals.

Indeed, throughout the research process, the role of ethnicity started to receive more and more of my attention and revealed itself as a central defining element in the lives of skilled migrants. The privilege of whiteness as a migrant in a normatively white society is undeniable, and certainly provides valorisation to the majority of skilled migrants, who, like myself, have benefited from their ethnicity in migration.

However, those skilled migrants who have racialized somatic features and negatively valued ethnicities exist between two realities of migration: in terms of class markers, they are elite, privileged migrants who correspond to the image of a wanted, appreciated migrant in today's global economy. They are highly educated, working in specialised industries, and paying their own way in the society. However, in their everyday lives outside of their workplace they are seen and treated as ethnic migrant subjects, subjected to all the assumptions and stereotypes, and the racialization and categorization processes that that entails.

What follows, is a quote from one of my interviewees as presented in article III of the dissertation. It explains the social reality many of the skilled migrants feel they live in, in this case a Kenyan IT expert who has been in Finland for 9 years. He has a degree from a Finnish university, speaks fluent Finnish and has a child with a Finnish woman. I ask him how he feels he is perceived in Finland: "Refugee", he says. "*Muslim, Somali Muslim. If I'm drinking beer,*

*then I'm a bad Muslim! If I go to a restaurant, they tell me that's pork, because they make an assumption that I'm Muslim, I'm not supposed to eat pork. So they already tell me when I'm going to pick the food 'hey, that's pork'. I eat pork! So there's quite many assumptions made whenever you go. And of course they obviously think that you're poor. That you come from a poor family, probably live in a mud house... yeah. [...] and enjoying all the country's benefits, and having a million babies and a couple of wives", he laughs. "That's the usual assumption."*

This informant represents a type of migrant that has been ignored in skilled migration studies to a worrying extent, and if there is one contribution over others that my dissertation offers to the research field, it is bringing light to the specific experiences of racialized skilled migrants. When walking down the street or going into a supermarket, they are not IT-engineers, or business consultants or sought-after global talent; they are ethnic migrants who are assumed to be refugees or asylum seekers, living off the Finnish tax-payers money.

Having a feeling that one is continuously, in their everyday lives, categorized as something that does not correspond to their self-defined group identity, and especially as something portrayed negatively, is destined to lead to reactions. These reactions in my research are to do with the identity negotiations that these migrants embark on to communicate that they are educated, highly-skilled and often highly-paid professionals, who pay their taxes to the Finnish system and contribute to the society as equal members. And that they, in fact, are in many ways like the image

of the 'migrant elite' as a type of migrant that the Finns say they appreciate and welcome. Yet many of them do not feel appreciated or welcomed, because their visibility is racialized in the context they now live in, and this brings about negative assumptions about their value not only as migrants, but also as individuals.

As a whole, the dissertation shows that despite their more privileged socio-economic situation, skilled migrants are experiencing similar issues with integration, adaptation and belonging in Finland as other migrants. As they live their everyday lives within the geographical, political and historical-cultural context of Finland they are subjected to racializing discourses, stereotypes and attitudes in much the same way as other migrants are. Furthermore, while white skilled migrants are readily viewed as 'migrant elite', those skilled migrants that have racialized ethnicities feel that they are perceived in the negative image of 'the migrant' as a non-western, non-skilled, nonprivileged subject.

Together, the findings of the articles point to the continued centrality of the intersection of class and ethnicity in the lives of skilled migrants in Finland: the categorizations and hierarchization they feel imposed on them, their own self-identification and group identity, and the myriad of identity negotiation strategies they employ all centre around class and ethnicity in different ways.

Even though ethnicity has proven to be such a central definer, I conclude that skilled migrants in general, regardless of ethnicity, do not feel that they are readily accepted as full members of Finnish society or seen as equal to Finns.

Those skilled migrants who come from Western countries and are white, feel that they are not expected to, or *even allowed* to, integrate because they are seen as representatives of the wanted side of globalization and multiculturalism through their appreciated cultures. They therefore feel that they are expected to remain as caricatures of their countrymen, adding positive internationalization to Finnish society through their 'valued Otherness'. Conversely, those skilled migrants with racialized ethnicities feel a pressure to integrate and even to 'become more Finnish', so

to speak, but at the same time they believe that they will not be accepted as legitimate members of a Finnish society marked by a narrative of homogeneity and normative whiteness.

Because of these perceived obstacles to integration into the Finnish society, belonging is searched from a 'parallel international society of Finland' consisting of other skilled migrants and 'internationally-minded Finns', rather than Finnish society as a whole. The primary goal for the skilled migrants merely seems to be to find a comfortable and positive

social location for themselves in the country they live in. Therefore, rather than integrating unidirectionally into the host society in the host society's terms, their integration is an ongoing process of negotiations between structure and agency: between the Finns' attitudes towards immigrants and their own understandings of their value as members of an internationalizing society. ■