

Finnish women in Gainesville, Florida

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In this article, we take a look at Gainesville, a northern Florida university town, as a sample of today's (2016) Finnish-American immigration patterns. The Gainesville area has a history of Finnish immigration, but, as elsewhere in the United States, the stereotypical immigrant has changed from a male laborer more to an educated woman. We base the article on interviews with eleven Finnish women living in Gainesville. What the interviews show is that all these women treasure their Finnish heritage and their Finnish or bicultural identity. They maintain contacts with Finland, intend to maybe return there one day, and attempt to pass the Finnish language to their children. These women differ from the typical immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: in addition to being highly educated and of a higher socio-economic class, they live in a different world where visiting the 'Old Country' is often an annual possibility, where Finnish language can be accessed via the internet, DVDs, telephones, and Skype, and where returning to Finland is not out of the question. Yet, these Finnish women struggle to pass their Finnish cultural identity and the Finnish language to their children, and just like the Finnish immigrants a century ago, they feel a sense of community, being brought together by the mere common denominator of Finnishness.

Introduction

Four-year-old Alexander refuses to speak in Finnish although he understands Finnish perfectly. For

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Alexander, Finnish is the 'language of women.' In Gainesville, Florida, most Finnish immigrants are women; therefore, little Alex associates his mother's language with women.

However, the stereotypical Finnish immigrant to Gainesville has not always been female. According to Ann Smith, oral historian at the Matheson Museum, roughly a hundred years ago "about twenty single men were recruited in New York by a mining company. These Finnish men were carpenters by trade, and, in exchange for land, they were to build homes for the miners and use timbers to shore up the mine shafts" (Smith, p.c. February 21, 2007). As recently as a decade ago, the mining firm Sandvik (formerly Driltech) in the nearby city of Alachua continued to attract Finnish engineers – most of them men – to the area. However, today the company is more interested in hiring non-foreign employees, and thus the number of Finnish men in Alachua County has gone down. By interviewing the more recent Finnish immigrants, we found out more about the typical Finn in Gainesville, who is no longer a man, but a married female, often somehow associated with the University of Florida.

Neither of us had come to Gainesville expecting to start running into Finns – almost exclusively Finnish women. One of us hears the name Riitta during roll call in class, one of us gets an email from a colleague at another UF department – Kristiina from Turku, and both of us find out that the new journalism professor moving into the house next door is Helena from Helsinki. And there were others. These women were well educated, comfortably middle class, many of them had successful careers, and they had come to Gainesville to stay. The information in this article is compiled from interviews with eleven Finnish women – a fairly loose network of friends and acquaintances who meet for coffee parties, weddings, baby showers, and the Finnish Independence Day, a network where Finnish

(Back Row) Rauni Takano, Sanna Hardin, Hanna Miles, Esko Patrakka, Amanda Ojala, Tuija Ojala, Janne Ojala. (Middle) Jaana Gold, Alex Gold, Olivia Ojala, Pauli Ojala, Irene Halmari-Meneses (Ruusa Meneses-Halmari in lap), Rauno Meneses-Halmari, Tuuli Mäkinen.

(Sitting) Arja Römpötti-Horn, Kristiina Wilson (Matilda Ojala in lap), Annikki Christensen.

Picture by Ward Wilson, November 2008, at the house of Arja Römpötti-Horn, Gainesville, Florida.



recipes are tried out and swapped, children's clothes recycled, and Finnish books and DVDs circulated.

Background

Gainesville is the county seat of Alachua County and its biggest city. This is the home of the University of Florida with its fifty thousand students, the largest and oldest state university in Florida. One of our interviewees, Annikki, who has lived in Gainesville the longest, remembers that when she arrived in 1963, there was no parking problem at UF. The entire Gainesville population was less than the University's student body today: a mere 39,000. The first Publix grocery store came to Main Street around that time. And back then, Albert the Alligator, the real live mascot of the University, was pulled around in a tub all over campus to games and other events, long before animal protection became a concern. Times have definitely changed since then: Gainesville has grown and developed. However, in terms of its location in northern Florida and its still moderate population of some 115,000, Gainesville could hardly be expected to be a magnet for 21st-century Nordic immigration. We were curious to find out what had brought Finnish women to Gainesville. It turns out that their reasons were not unlike ours.

Our interviewees

The age of our interviewees varied between 20 and 80. On an average, they had lived in Gainesville for ten

years, with forty-four years as the record. While three of the eleven at the time of the interviews worked at home caring for children, all these women were well educated: three of the eleven had doctoral degrees, five other had either an MA or BA-level degree, and one had an Associate's Degree. Two had a high-school diploma, and even these two were doing extremely well: one worked as a head teller at a local bank; the other one, our youngest interviewee, was busily working towards an Associate's Degree at Santa Fe Community College. The Finnish women in Gainesville fall quite clearly into the category that Korkiasaari and Roinila (2005: 114) characterize as "the young well-educated, middle-class professionals in major cities".

In painting the picture of the Finnish women in Gainesville, we were interested in issues of identity, level of integration into life in Gainesville, contacts with Finland, and the use and maintenance of the Finnish language. Since most of the women had children, we were especially interested in the measures they had taken to pass their native language to their children.

Nine of the eleven interviewed women said that they were in Gainesville permanently. Gainesville is where their jobs – or their husbands' jobs – are. Some of their husbands worked at the University of Florida or in executive positions elsewhere in Gainesville. However, most of the women had come to Gainesville because of their own academic prospects at the University of Florida. One was in Gainesville because her father had a job in the area, and another one came to study at Santa Fe College.

Despite their established comfortable connections to Gainesville, many of these women, interestingly,

considered returning to Finland at some point. Most explained that they desired to return for summers, holidays, or retirement, but only a few would seriously consider returning to live in Finland permanently. The most recent arrival, who had been in Gainesville only for five weeks, said that she will most likely return after her studies.

Only four women gave a negative answer to the question of whether they had considered returning to Finland. These four had all lived in the United States for a long time – for the average of 23 years (47, 16.5, 15, and 14 years). Those who answered that they might return to Finland had been in the United States less on an average: twelve years. Interestingly, however, the length of residence did not guarantee the direction of the answer because among those who considered returning to Finland there were women who had lived in the United States for as long as 21 and 18 years. For many, going back to Finland may be unrealistic in practice: none of them is married to a Finnish man.

Yet our interviewees visit Finland often – approximately once per year. Everyone would like to go at least once a year, and the ones who do not are forced to this decision by family circumstances: they either have an older person to care for or children, who make trans-Atlantic travel difficult.

Positive attitudes towards the ‘Old Country’ were revealed by the fact that all interviewees could easily list things they missed about Finland. Food featured prominently in this list: altogether twenty-two items mentioned were specific food items, Finnish candy, or food in general. As a remedy to the unavailability of Finnish produce in the grocery stores, most of our interviewees cooked and baked Finnish foods – something that also Roinila (2006: 16) reports as a regular habit of American Finns. Eight of our interviewees missed Finnish rye bread, but they also mentioned dairy products, mustard, smoked salmon, and coffee. The candy items that our Finns missed were, somewhat predictably, Finnish chocolate and *salmiakki*, a candy made with licorice root and ammonium chloride. Also predictably, six interviewees mentioned that they missed the sauna (cf. Roinila 2006: 16). In addition, there were isolated references to other aspects of the Finnish lifestyle: people missed the summer cottage culture, Finnish nature, its snowy landscape, and, of course, relatives. One mentioned the Finnish health-and-retirement system.

Identity

We were also interested in issues of identity. Five of the women claimed to have a Finnish identity, and six felt themselves to be bicultural: both Finnish and American. We found little connection between the length of residence in the United States and cultural identity. Those who identified themselves culturally as Finns had been in the United States for an average of 18.8 years (47, 18, 15, 14, and 0); those who claimed to have a bicultural identity had been in the U.S. for an average of 11.6 years (21, 16.5, 15, 12, 10, 6). What may be most interesting here is that none of our interviewees claimed American identity – a factor that may of course have been influenced by the interview itself.

Another issue that can be seen as an indication of Finnish (or bicultural) identity is the fact that everyone had Finnish artifacts at home: Finnish dishes, books, music, rugs, and Marimekko products (see also Pia Lane’s 2006 study on Finnish people in Canada). These artifacts, as many implied during the interviews, represent Finnish pride – maybe even patriotism. The Finnish flag decorated the room of Alex, Arja’s teenage son.

Language

The majority (two thirds) of our interviewees use both Finnish and English as their home language. Four indicate that English is the sole home language. Nobody has Finnish exclusively as their home language, which is explained by the fact that none of these women is married to a Finnish man. Out of the eleven interviewees, one was unmarried at the time of the interviews. Seven out of the ten spouses of the married women are American, one is Canadian, one is Danish, and one is Japanese. What is interesting is that even though ten of our interviewees are married to non-Finns, seven still use Finnish as one of the home languages. The children explain this finding. If all of the women were to have children, all of them would be likely to use some Finnish at home. Passing the native tongue to their children seems to be one of the big priorities for all the Finnish mothers in Gainesville. The ones who have not managed to pass the Finnish language to their children regret it.

Table 1. Levels of competence (on a scale of 1-5) among the children (N=13) of the Gainesville Finnish mothers (N=7).

Mother	Children / Age	Level of competence (1=lowest, 5=highest) in the four language skills (U=Understanding, S=Speaking, R=Reading, W=Writing).					
		0	1	2	3	4	5
Annikki	Ken / adult Eva / adult	USRW USRW					
Sanna	Samuli / 12 Thomas / 11 Erika / 3.5	RW RW		S S S		U U U	
Arja	Alex / 14 Adam / 12 Ariana / 12		RW RW RW		S S	U U	S
Jaana	Alexander / 4		S				U
Rauni	Oona / 18					RWS	U
Päivi	Thomas / 14 Sonja / 12		R	W R		S U	SU
Irene ¹⁾	Rauno / 2.5						SU

¹⁾A child of one of the authors is included here because they were Gainesville residents at the time of the interviews.

Seven out of the eleven women have children – altogether fourteen children. Two of these were infants who did not speak yet. We asked the mothers to estimate the level of Finnish competence among the twelve children (i.e., those who were old enough to speak) in four language skills: understanding the language, speaking it, reading, and writing. Table 1 shows the reported levels of competence for the twelve Finnish-American children of our interviewees. (In this table we have included a thirteenth child, Rauno, who is the toddler son of one of the authors; at the time of the interviews, they also lived in Gainesville.)

All the mothers acknowledge the challenge of passing the native language on to their children in a situation where English surrounds them everywhere, daily. Yet, except for the two adult children, all of the young children of Finnish-speaking mothers have acquired some level of competence in Finnish. Predictably, this competence is stronger in the areas of understanding and speaking Finnish than in reading and writing. All Arja's three children read and write some Finnish; Päivi's daughter writes Finnish better than her brother, but the brother seems to speak (and understand) Finnish more – something the mother attributes to personality differences. The 18-year-old Oona is probably closest to having developed native-

like skills in all the areas of linguistic competence. All acknowledge that visits to Finland help their children's Finnish skills.

All mothers consciously want their children to acquire Finnish, and they use Finnish books, videos, and music to aid in the achievement of this goal. And the mother whose adult children did not acquire Finnish reports that they are now upset with her because she didn't "teach them Finnish." When she defends herself saying that she "did try," her child says: "You should have forced us." But she is not to be blamed since developing full competence in Finnish within the English-speaking majority culture is not easy. In fact, some 'forcing' at some points may evidently be required. It will be interesting to see how the mothers succeed in fulfilling their goal of passing Finnish to their children in Gainesville, where no formal community support exists to help in nurturing the children's developing Finnish competence. The mothers are often the sole source of Finnish input.

In consciously working towards passing their native language on to their children, these 21st-century immigrant mothers differ considerably from earlier immigrant parents. These women speak fluent English and have different goals. In the past, immigrants felt that they had to ensure that their children learn

English, and this often happened at the expense of the native language. Today, the concern is not only that children learn English but also that they acquire and maintain Finnish. All of these mothers know that they will have to work extremely hard to allow for the development of competence in Finnish.

Bringing up children bilingually also involves the issue of language contact between the majority and minority languages. The mixing of English and Finnish in everyday language use is a reality for most mothers. As the reasons for language mixing we received the standard answers frequently reported in the literature on codeswitching (e.g., Hatch 1976, Gumperz 1982, Myers-Scotton 1993, Bolonyai 2005, Halmari 2006). People mix languages accidentally, for certain idioms, when they cannot think of a certain term in either Finnish or English, in the case of genuine lexical gaps (when there are no corresponding terms in the other language), and – sometimes if they get angry. Because all the married women have non-Finnish spouses, they report having to switch to English in addressing their children when the father is around. Only one of our interviewees said that she never mixes her languages.

Because most women mix English and Finnish in daily interactions with their children, their attitudes to this normal bilingual phenomenon are also predominantly non-judgmental – or at least understanding, largely reflecting the ones reported by Martin and Virtaranta (1993). The Gainesville women do not see language mixing as a big problem, even though they do sometimes find their own and their children's mixing “annoying” or “silly,” and, consequently, they aim more or less consciously at speaking “pure Finnish.” One points out that codemixing is part of the “new language”: even in today's Finland, English is mixed into Finnish. One comment about codemixing is illustrative: “*Sehän on all right*” (‘It's *all right*’). It seems that the Gainesville mothers' language mixing is a metaphor for their bicultural lives.

Conclusion

In the middle of rural northern Florida is Gainesville, a little part of America's tossed salad of cultural diversity. The Finnish women of Gainesville are part of the salad. Many were drawn to the town by the University

of Florida and the businesses that exist there because of the University. The women keep their culture alive by speaking to their children in Finnish and creating homes where full American assimilation is not the norm. Unlike most earlier immigrants, these women are also privileged enough to be able to travel to Finland often, reminding their children of their cultural heritage. With the absence of an organized Finnish institution, however, they face the challenge of up-keeping a rare language. We trust, however, that with continued visits to Finland little Alexander will also realize that Finnish language can belong to him as well.

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