The Narrative Construction of Karelian Identity

Pertti Alasuutari

&

Maarit Alasuutari
The Problem

- How is it possible that people reflectively narrate their identities and yet are emotionally attached to them?
- Such a combination of reflectivity and emotional attachment is characteristic of second generation migrants living in diaspora.
- The Finnish Karelian evacuees’ (middle-aged) children are used as a case example in this study.
The Finnish Karelians

• A considerable part of Karelia belonged to Finland before World War II
• Nearly 11 percent of Finland’s total population lived in Finnish Karelia
• As a consequence of defeat in war, the territory was surrendered to Soviet Union in 1944
• 480,000 people from the total population of 3.7 million were resettled to other parts of Finland
The resettlement of Karelian migrants

• Of the 480,000 evacuees, 230,000, about 40,000 families, were farm people
  - Their entire holdings had been over 1,500,000 hectares of land
  - They received as compensation 140,000 farms, whose average size was 15 hectares of field and 30 hectares of forest
  - Altogether 2.7 million hectares of land changed ownership

• 250,000 evacuees were urban dwellers who could freely choose where to move
  - They favoured the big cities such as Helsinki, Turku and Tampere
The resettlement of Karelian migrants

- During the first years many Karelians moved from the original target regions, so that they particularly populated Southern and Southeastern parts of Finland.
- During the post-war decades the urbanization of Karelian migrants has been faster than among the rest of the Finnish population.
Evacuation zones and target regions in the plan made in 1944

The Border Karelians
The Central Karelians
The Isthmus Karelians
Evacuation plan for municipalities, 1945
The proportion of Karelian rural evacuees of the total population in 1948
Social adaptation and integration

• The Karelian migrants were soon integrated with the original population
  – In the first municipal elections Karelian migrants had their own lists, but later they appeared in different parties’ lists
  – (Among Karelians a much weaker support for communism than among the original population)
  – In a great majority of all marriages Karelians married a spouse from the original population

• On the other hand Karelians established their own associations, cherished their traditions and hoped to be able to move back some day
The 1980s and 1990s change

- *Perestroika* introduced in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev started a change
  - It became possible to visit Karelia officially
- The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 further changed the setting
  - Travelling to Karelia was free; about 1.26 million Finns crossed the boundary during 1991-2 and many of them were visiting their old home areas
  - The deeds of the Soviet Union, including the Karelia question, were opened for discussion
- Consequently, many people, including the second generation, got more interested in their Karelian roots
The Empirical Data

• The second generation Karelian migrants interviewed
  – An announcement in a local newspaper plus personal contacts with people with a Karelian background
  – 11 qualitative interviews, 3 men and 8 women

• Previous research as secondary data
• Long-term “participant observation”
Conscious construction of Karelian identity

• The interviews contain several examples of talk in which speakers are engaged in conscious “impression management” to prove their Karelian identity

• For instance, consider the following informant, who “manipulates” her ancestry to show that she is truly Karelian:
Interviewer: Okay, so if you are asked where do you come from, how do you usually respond?
Informant: I list my grandparents’ places of birth.
Interviewee: Your grandparents?
Informant: Yes because if I list my parents there is 50 percent Häme ancestry and it does not sound good. But then if I list my grandparents’ places of birth I can reduce it to 25 percent. And then, well I was born in central Finland and I have spent my childhood in Satakunta and now I am back here in Häme, so I suppose I have picked up all sorts of influence, but I sort of feel that the dominant genes, they come from my mother’s mother and then from my father’s family, and the rest are maybe more recessive.
(Interview 10)
Conscious construction of Karelian identity

• Informants also avoid details that would imply that their interest in their Karelian roots is a later phenomenon.

• They emphasize instead that they are born Karelian.

• Consider the example of a family who is engaged in playing Karelian folk music and performing as a group. Both spouses are interviewed simultaneously:
Husband: We have introduced Karelian music to our band repertoire fairly late as a matter of fact.
Wife: Hmm
Husband: To our family band.
Interviewer: How late in time?
Husband: Well it was in the 90s, we began to sing these Karelian wedding songs, and then we found these melodies that we played, even though I had recorded them in the beginning of the 70s
Wife: I suppose so.
Husband: When the boys began to play.
Wife: Well it was of course that you were a music researcher and there are these master musicians from Satakunta [a Southwestern part of Finland]
[...
In my view it was kind of self-evident because the Karelians came with their bare hands, so your father came the same way, he has not brought any material with him. And still he was a founding member of Finland’s folk musicians’ association, and it was established to advance folk music, and you were there too, so primarily you were for that new thing, there was no juxtaposition between it and Karelian folk music [...] they had such a small repertoire and little time to rehearse …
(Interview 1)
How are people convinced by their own constructions?

- Although the informants consciously construct their stories, they live by them
  - They are attached to their Karelian identity, which they think is a true and authentic part of their self
  - This is achieved by a number of ways
  - Consider the following examples
The proof of a sense of place

Informant: Since the Karelian character is more lively and a bit more complex than an Ostrobotnian person, I must say it was kind of anguishing to live the years of childhood in the meadows of Liminka, no valley no hill, absolutely shocking, and one didn’t understand where the depression always came from. But then when, you know, we faced a new life situation in 1970 because my husband came here to continue his studies, so I said when we now move away from Oulu we leave with the idea that we are never coming back. You see I tried to say that it is so hard for a person with a family to move. Of course that was part of it but the background motive was that this is so different as a landscape

Interviewer: Yeah

Informant: so that I am here much more at home, that one is somehow ..

[...] It is passed on from generation to generation even if the new generation hasn’t seen the landscape it still finds its way [to a similar place]

(Interview 6)
The proof of a sense of place

Informant: I wonder when it was, must have been in the 1970s, I got the first chance to make a visit to the other side of the border, we were a small group. I have a friend who is a teacher in Russian language and she had gathered a small group, was it ten people, primarily from Joensuu, her friends and acquaintances, so we made a trip to Moscow by train
Interviewer: Yeah
Informant: And it was somehow so fine, it was a summer evening at eight and we then came to Vainikkala (cries). It felt like some fulfillment, longing … That even though one strongly opposed mother’s remembering and it sometimes felt that mother didn’t live this day that one was supposed to be living, when one understood what, then one really [understood] what they had lost
(Interview 6)
The proof of outward appearance

There had been an announcement in the Teacher magazine about the Sakkola national costume, a new model, and a craftswoman had made it. And I said that it is pretty and I wanted to come and see. So she said why don’t you put it on and, really as you can notice I’m certainly not a silent person but as I stood there in front of the mirror with my arms apart and looked at myself in the mirror … and then I said can I pay this with a money transfer and didn’t even ask what it costs. And it was worth a pretty penny but still I absolutely definitely wanted to have that symbol to myself, and I wear it with pride. So, how should I put it, being Karelian, it is part [of oneself], it does not have to show in everything, but certain things like this may then, alongside everyday life, be very significant.

(Interview 1)
The proof of inherited features

Informant: The first thing that one knew that this is a Karelian thing was when at school in a domestic science class we were taught how to make Karelian pies. Since mother had never made them at home so it really hit father, so that I then always got one mark when I made Karelian pies at home so one really noticed their value. Mother then also tried, but she could not really handle the rolling [of the dough], so that when mother-in-law made such thin, could make really authentic Karelian pies, of course skillfully and somehow differently, so they tasted somehow like Häme-kind what mother made. So I remember when she tried to use a pulsator washing machine that has the cylinders between which laundy was dried
Interviewer: Yeah
Informant: She used baking papers and then the dough and in that way tried to make it easier, but in the end it was left for me making the Karelian pies.
(Interview 10)
Discussion

- People are convinced of their ethnic identity through emotional experience
- The experience is anchored with a concrete, bodily sensation such as appearance, landscape or practice