

Comparison as a Means of Encountering Others in the Estonian–Finnish Transnational Space

Pihla Maria Siim
University of Tartu
Estonia

Abstract

Drawing on interviews with Estonian families who move between Estonia and Finland, the article elaborates on how interviewees use comparison to build their identity and belonging and to justify their choices. When negotiating membership in Finland, the strategy of invisibility is available since there are no visible differences that would cause them to be categorised as different. However, Estonian families also use contrast as a form of counter-speech against discrimination and as a strategy to highlight the difference between themselves and different others, portraying themselves as hard-working, deserving immigrants.

Keywords: Estonia, Finland, transnationalism, labor migration, discrimination, comparison

Introduction

The capitals of Estonia and Finland, Tallinn and Helsinki, are separated by a two-and-a-half-hour ferry journey. The two cities are sometimes playfully referred to as Talsinki or Hellinna, and the most imaginative plans picture a tunnel connecting the cities, making it possible to move from one city to another by car or train in half an hour. The shared space of Estonia and Finland is of course much more than only Talsinki. It can also include commuting 1000 kilometres from Tartu in southern Estonia to Rovaniemi in northern Finland, something that entails endless hours in a car, unless your employer has paid for flights, as they have done for one of the doctors I interviewed.

Exactly how much the COVID-19 pandemic changes mobility patterns between these countries remains to be seen, but prior to this event movement between Estonia and Finland was so intense that researchers talked about an Estonian–Finnish transnational space (see Jakobson et al. 2012). Especially after 2004, when Estonia joined the European Union, labour migration from Estonia to Finland increased significantly, and since 2006 Estonians have not needed a work permit to work in Finland. On the one hand, Estonians can be regarded as a rather privileged group of migrants in Finland (with regard to nationality and race), while on the other their position is precarious, as is that of any minority group.

In 2013, when I started my fieldwork with Estonian families moving between Estonia and Finland, the work was within the framework of a project that concentrated on children’s experiences of migration and mobility. Accordingly, the research par-

ticipants were families with children. In subsequent years my focus shifted slightly from children to adults, although the perspective of the family has remained central. This article presents an ethnographic case study exploring ways in which the (adult) interviewees narrate their belonging, modes of being-at-home in a place and plans for the future. To illustrate the kind of material I am working with, I will summarise the story of Kairi,¹ a 43-year-old woman whom I interviewed. Kairi is a doctor and lives in Finland with her son.

When I divorced my husband, it was financially very difficult time for me. At the beginning I went to Finland for weekend shifts. Then I received an offer to work there full time and I decided to give it a go. I had heard that Finland has a very good kindergarten and school system. The kindergarten system is indeed very child-centred and teachers at school are also very friendly. As a matter of fact, nothing extra is required from children. The Finnish school system is terribly tolerant of everyone. Children should be encouraged to try a little bit harder, develop their abilities. However, I would not claim the children need to do nothing. But what I still don't get is why they have to go to school in socks, indoor shoes are not used.

At first I didn't really miss anything from Estonia, but now I miss everything. Food, going to the theatre... In Finland I basically don't eat any meat, I don't like Finnish meat products at all. And in Finland there is a complete lack of the barbecue culture that we have in Estonia. Finns take a position that we have always eaten this and it is good, Estonians say "why don't we give this a try".

And at work... in Finland, people's temperament and work culture are quite different. There is less work, also physically. Unfortunately, I have to say that the Finns don't have a very high work culture. If it is time to have a lunch break it is more important than the fact that your sick patient is waiting. Maybe one reason why Estonians are valued is that we do a lot of work. In Finland, if the working day ends at 3 o'clock it ends at 3 o'clock, exactly. Construction workers say the same thing. At 3 o'clock the hammer falls and the next day you'll pick it and continue work from where you left off.

There are also Estonians in our work collective, and we do keep together. Estonians understand you in a different way. Finns are like Estonians, not very open, right. And to talk about a more negative side, although I feel I'm doing well, the Finns nevertheless have an opportunity to tell me I'm Estonian after all, and have studied in another university. Finns think that Estonians are somehow still a little lower than them. Politically Finns are very correct, outwardly, they say a dark-skinned person is also a human, but what they do and think inwardly is entirely something else. We are treated better than the real refugees, perhaps because we work, right. The demands refugees have are very high, the taxes I pay are also used to support them. But they will never integrate here. I was much more tolerant actually before I went to Finland.

When I come to Estonia I do everything here. I go to the hairdresser, beautician, pedicure, manicure. In my opinion Finns cannot do this job, that's what all Estonians say, don't they? The Estonian woman, even if she doesn't earn that high a salary, somehow she takes more care of her appearance.

As a single mother, it is much easier to cope in Finland. In Estonia I would not have been able to raise my child alone. However, now I would be ready to come back but my son said he wants to be in Finland, his friends and school are there. My poor

son is now in the middle, I guess he doesn't know exactly whether he is a Finn or an Estonian. And Finnish work culture spoils people. It is much easier to come from Estonia to Finland than to come back from Finnish working conditions. And people in Estonia tend to think that we make easy money. Going back we would certainly hear that we are traitors who went and lived an easy life in Finland.

Kairi told me her story in two interview sessions in 2016 and 2017. In her answers, she was probably guided by the idea of giving me a meaningful explanation of her choices and life course, and the summary I made here highlights her use of different comparisons, which will be analysed in more detail later in the article. Comparison is present in Kairi's story on many levels—sometimes more implicitly, sometimes more explicitly. Usually she uses comparison on her own initiative, not as a result of my question encouraging her to compare the two societies, for example. Kairi contrasts the possibilities available to her as a single mother in Finland and in Estonia and compares the challenges of leaving Estonia to those of returning. She spells out the differences in working cultures and school systems, touches on what she feels to be boundary markers, and on gendered, bodily aspects of migration, and contrasts mobile Estonians with refugees and sedentary Estonians.

In the context of migration, comparison is used to construct identity and belonging. Ulrika Wolf-Knuts (2003) has studied contrast as a narrative technique among Swedish-speaking Finns who have emigrated to South Africa. As she points out, the very concept of emigration implies the idea that one country has advantages over another. Something that can be seen when people narrate their lives, giving meaningful explanations for their choices.

In this article I aim to elaborate on how the interviewed Estonians use comparison to build identity and belonging. They do this by representing their choices as reasonable and highlighting the differences between the two countries, as well as using comparisons of themselves and others in a way that emphasises their own identities in the context of migration.

Context and Research Data

Since 1991, neighboring Finland has been the most popular destination for Estonian migrants because of geographic, cultural and linguistic proximity. These enable migrants to return to Estonia often, therefore retaining parts of their lives there, and to learn Finnish quickly (Anniste 2014, 24–25). Labour migration from Estonia to the longer-serving EU member states increased after EU accession in 2004, and there are many Estonian circular migrants and transnational commuters. Since 2004, there have been changes in the composition of Estonian emigrants with substantially more originating from the rural areas of Estonia; at the same time, the proportion that are highly educated has decreased. Migrants have also become younger, and the emigration of ethnic Estonians (as compared to other ethnicities living in Estonia) has increased significantly (Anniste 2014, 20).

More than half of the Estonian citizens currently working abroad do so in Finland, where they comprise the largest group of foreign citizens. According to the Estonian

population register, there were 52,400 Estonian citizens living in Finland in July 2019, in addition to 18,500 with a registered Finnish contact address. According to one estimate, in 2012 there were an additional 30,000 Estonians commuting and working in Finland but living permanently in Estonia (Statistics Finland 2013). It has been pointed out that Estonia is one of the major countries of origin for commuting workers in Europe: the highest percentage of the workforce leaving their country of origin to work are Slovaks (5%), and Estonians and Hungarians (just over 2% each) (European Commission 2019, 78). Men were clearly dominant (92%) among those who worked abroad but reside in Estonia (European Commission 2019).

In recent years the volume of emigration has been smaller and return migration to Estonia has increased. In 2019, Estonia's net migration was positive for the fifth year in a row, and the net migration with Finland was positive for the third year in a row (Statistics Estonia 2020). However, return migration trends might also change according to the economic and political situations.

Estonians most often move to neighbouring Finland in search of higher wages—better working conditions, higher living standards and social guarantees are also appealing. As stated by Alho and Sippola (2018), the Estonian neoliberal economic model is highly exposed to economic fluctuation. This, together with weak social security, leaves the Estonian workforce vulnerable. Often children and young people are at the centre of migration and mobility, with parents frequently migrating to create a better future for their children and families. What at first sight might seem to be purely economic or political transnationalism can often implicitly, if not overtly, be for the wellbeing of future generations (see Coe et al. 2011, 3–5, 11).

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork (2013–2014, 2016–2019) consisting of participant observation and interviews among (ethnic) Estonian families in which some family members live or work in Finland, or have done so in the past.² The interviewees had different occupations, for example construction worker, doctor, entrepreneur, credit analyst, bus driver, teacher, cleaner, office worker and nurse. In addition, some interviewees were studying or unemployed. A typical pattern among the families studied is that the father first works in Finland and the spouse and children join him later, with their planned short-term relocation becoming extended. There are also some one-parent families and cross-border commuters among the interviewees. Altogether, 41 interviews were conducted in the greater Helsinki area and in Turku (Finland)³ as well as in Tartu (Estonia). Seven of the interviews were group interviews in which more than one member of the family was present. One of the interviews was conducted in Finnish but otherwise the language used in the interviews was Estonian. The interviewees were recruited through children's club activities, Estonian language courses, kindergarten(s), through common acquaintances, or through social media. After the research was reported in the news some interviewees themselves took the initiative and contacted project members. Where possible, different members of the same family were interviewed. Among the interviewees there were 24 women, 7 men, and 18 children (aged 6 to 15). The interviewees had moved to Finland from different parts of Estonia: many are from the cities of Tartu, Tallinn, and Pärnu and surrounding

regions, but there are also families from Viljandi and Jõgeva counties, for example. The majority of Estonians working and/or residing in Finland do so in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, as did many of the families who contributed to this study. However, there are also thousands of Estonians living in other parts of the country, including the countryside.

Narrating Belonging

Home and homemaking can be approached as processes that contain different dimensions. 'Home' refers both to a material dwelling and to an affective space shaped by emotion and feelings of belonging (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Studying the concept of home in migration, Ralph and Staeheli (2011) suggest that home should be understood in conjunction with belonging. They stress the importance of conceptualising home as both dynamic and moored, experienced both as a location and as a set of relationships that shape identities and feelings of belonging. They also argue that people who do not cross borders experience homes the same way – as locations, as relationships, as simultaneously fixed and fluid. Home can thus be seen as a "space in-becoming" (Nowicka 2007, 73): belonging to a home emerges from sets of relationships and entwined social processes of incorporation and exclusion that are partly self-defined, partly other-defined (Young 1990). Thus, the challenge is not only to examine migrants' articulations of home, but at the same time to interrogate ways in which various social relations and power geometries influence complex registers of home (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 520).

For the interviewees, "feeling at home" is connected to being appreciated and to material security and safety, as the later examples in the article show. While belonging is a subjective feeling, it is also socially defined: it is important to be surrounded by people significant to you – family, friends, etc., – and to feel that surrounding society treats you well. This social element of belonging speaks not only to the feelings of identification and familiarity, but to experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523).

During the interviews people gave different accounts of their feelings about belonging. Initially, living in Finland can be loaded with practical and other difficulties, but accounts of the first encounter sometimes also resemble stories of "love at first sight", with positive feelings and significant emotions. Stories of the first encounter often entail implicit comparisons, describing how interviewees have felt in different places. Since the stories are personal experience or family stories describing the emotional attachments people have, they cannot be judged to be right or wrong (see Wolf-Knuts 2003, 93). During her interview Signe described the difficulties she and her family met in Estonia. Their first choice had not been to leave Estonia, but in order to provide for his family, Signe's partner left to work in Finland and Signe went to visit him after a short separation. Emotions were high, and she soon decided to follow him to Finland. The story of her arrival to Finland sums up her positive feelings of hope and of new beginnings, and the joy of having her family together again:

The related, beautiful story is that when I arrived in Finland with the father of my children, when I stepped off of the ferry in Katajanokka harbour [...] you know, here was quite a different scent, a different feeling, I would call it a scent of love. [...] two days I spent here, and when I went back with the boat, I knew exactly that my place was here. My place was next to my partner. [...] Of course, my boss, he laughed outright in my face: what would I do there? I didn't know. I had no plan of what to do. I just thought about my family, that family needs to be together, it was my only thought.

(Woman, 45)

After Signe's arrival in Finland, she found work and her children went to school and kindergarten. Signe says that it was during this period that she heard herself laughing again for the first time in a long while.

Signe's account points to the importance of sensory experiences and related emotions in settling into new surroundings. In migrations studies, when understanding 'migrant worlds' more and more attention has been given to the body as it moves between places and locales, and to the importance of the affective and emotional dimensions of mobility (see Wang 2016, 5). People perceive their surroundings through their bodies, in addition to which comparison is not just an intellectual process, it is something that we perceive with our senses (Wolf-Knuts 2003, 98–99). Sensation in itself can also be a boundary marker: when it makes itself felt, one is on the border, but when one grows accustomed to it one hardly notices it (*ibid.*, 101). However, how and when these sensations are verbalised, i.e. when the memories become relevant, depends on the life situation of the person.

When interviewees narrate belonging to their current place of residence they are not only talking about their experiences and the feelings they have towards Estonia or Finland. While belonging is a subjective feeling, it is also socially defined (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523). As the interviewees were and are trying to position themselves in society, their feelings of belonging develop in relation to other people and groups. Although the group of Estonians in Finland may seem homogeneous to an outsider, there are in fact hierarchies and inequalities. Some interviewees have stated that they keep a distance from other Estonians because of the lack of common interests or shared values. These in-group hierarchies also become visible when the interviewees talk about Estonians (but also other migrants) who (presumably) live on social benefits. When making these comments they stress that they have worked hard all their lives, and have come to work in Finland. One reason for this type of juxtaposing is that levels of acceptance of different types of immigrant are, among other things, strongly tied to socio-economic factors. For example, Finns are most accepting of immigrants who hold jobs and qualifications (Salonen and Villa 2006), and Estonians living in Finland tend to be influenced by this pattern. One can say that value judgements and articulations of morality are always present, and are used in identity negotiations, within the different categories imposed on immigrants, either by host societies or by co-immigrants (see Koskela 2014). Contrasting herself with some other migrants she knows, Pille, a 30-year-old woman, said during the interview that she is willing to work hard in order

to have a higher income than social benefits alone would bring her:

Many Estonians come here to live on the social benefits, like they receive their 800 euros a month. I would never think like that, I would rather think that if I would work, I would receive 2,000 euros, why should I sit here for 800 euros. But people put up with 800 euros and then they sit and think why don't they have this or that, but we have done it all ourselves and worked our fingers to the bone, thanks to which we do have our own problems [...].

(Woman, 30)

This can be taken as a statement against the widespread idea of migrants living easy lives, taking advantage of the social benefits offered in Finland—or other Western European countries. Pille's (un)intentional aim seems to be to portray herself as a deserving, good immigrant in the eyes of the majority population as a way of challenging the categorisations or identity positions potentially imposed on her by others. This rhetorical strategy, also called counter-speech, is typically employed by narrators in contexts where they feel that their reputations and identities are threatened (Juhila 2004; Bock and Horigan 2015, 65). However, this strategy can also increase suspicion between different groups.

In their study on Estonian migration to Finland, Anniste et al. (2017) have distinguished three migration patterns: bi-national migrants, circular migrants and transnational commuters. These groups have somewhat different orientations. Bi-national migrants have either stayed in Finland for many years and/or intend to remain long-term, although they still have relatively strong ties to Estonia. Circular migrants, on the other hand, view their migration as temporary and plan to return soon, hence they do not wish to invest much effort in establishing social relations in Finland. Transnational commuters are connected to their host country solely through work, remaining simultaneously active in their social and family lives in Estonia. These different orientations are discernible among my interviewees, some of whom could be called bi-national migrants according to this categorisation. They have criticised their acquaintances, and, in general, other Estonians for sticking to their temporary solutions. These solutions, together with recurrent visits to Estonia, also affect 'homemaking' and the ways people relate to different places (cf. Siim and Assmuth 2016). This "lasting temporariness" (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005) can be looked down on at least in part because setting one's roots in a single place remains the norm, deviations from which seem to call for explanations.

According to the experiences of the interviewees, travelling back and forth between the two countries makes it more difficult to settle and feel at home in Finland. As one woman stated, she could not live in this way:

I feel very sad for those Estonians here who live a hundred of them together, not wanting to create a home here, they are just here to work. But never in my life would I imagine that kind of life for myself. I mean you can move because of a job, but then you'd move your whole life with you, or not move at all, or move somewhere to finish some job in one or two months, but not do it for years. [...] There are a lot of people like that

here actually, who go home. To Tallinn or somewhere else [in Estonia]. I feel sad about those families as well. But different things fit for different people. I cannot say it's bad, but I couldn't imagine it for myself.

(Woman, 37)

However, it is not easy to distinguish between “short-term” mobility and “permanent” migration in the Estonian–Finnish context (Alho & Kumer-Haukanõmm 2020, 251). Many of the interviewees first come to Finland for a short period, planning to return. Only when the stay is prolonged or a family realises that living separately does not suit them does the family follow. Families who have decided to move together as a family, often stress the importance of being together in one country, but it is important to keep in mind that these accounts are strongly context-dependant. Stories told by cross-border commuters and their families also show the bright sides of this arrangement: family members staying in Estonia do not need to change their everyday routines or give up their social networks, children can continue going to school in a familiar environment, it is easier to take care of elderly relatives who remain, increased income may resolve long-term problems in family life, and separation can make people appreciate family time more (see also Telve 2019).

In addition to these in-group distinctions between cross-border commuters, circular migrants and families whose stay is more permanent, interviewees have set themselves apart from other migrant groups, stressing the cultural closeness of Estonians to Finns and cherishing an image of themselves as good and deserving immigrants (cf. Alho and Sippola 2018). Estonians do not necessarily consider themselves immigrants at all. In the next interview excerpt Kairi reminds her ten-year-old son that they have also immigrated.

Mother: We also had a funny incident once at home. [My son] came home from school, saying that the immigrants took their ball, why do they come here! Then I said, think calmly: you were also not born here.

Son: One of my classmates said that Estonia and Finland are relatives.

(Mother 43, son 10)

This type of attitude is not expressed only by children; interviewees also make a strong difference between themselves and other migrants. However, interestingly they do not compare themselves to all immigrant groups. The comparisons usually involve other Estonians, and sometimes Russians; from other immigrant groups, they generally compare themselves to refugees, who they term the “real immigrants”. The negative attitude towards refugees is discernible in discussions in the Facebook groups of Estonians in Finland, during the interviews, and also in the results of the latest parliamentary elections. Estonian radical right-wing party EKRE turned out to be very popular among Estonians living and voting in Finland. EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) received 43.7% of the votes of Estonians living abroad, most of them

in Finland (cf. In Estonia EKRE received 17.8% of the votes) (Postimees, 04/03/2019). Indeed, several interviewees claimed that Finnish people are too gentle and generous towards refugees, and they should rather think about their own people:

Finland has too much of a soft heart, I would say, they accept everyone. But at least I think that if I moved to Africa tomorrow, the day after I would start to speak their language [...] but the services for foreigners are too good here, especially for those who don't work, that's what I mean. [...] That Finland tries to help all the refugees but doesn't take into consideration their own people.

(Woman, 53)

As this and other similar examples show, there is sometimes tension among people who are grouped together by outsiders, or by the majority. Many interviewees seem to have adopted the public discourses on desirable and undesirable immigrants, and sometimes work hard to separate themselves from the latter. Thus, among immigrants themselves there is grouping and labelling similar to that exercised by the majority. Categorising and marginalising others helps the Estonian interviewees to bring into focus their shared communalities and sameness with Finns (cf. Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 524). Jon E. Fox (2013) has studied East European migrants working in the UK and states that there is evidence that they have been the targets of racism, but that much less attention has been focused on how they are also perpetrators of racism. The Hungarians and Romanians that Fox studied emphasise their superior work ethics as compared to other minorities. These comparisons can be used as leverage to improve their standing in the labour market and to define and defend their precarious position by portraying some other groups as inferior. Comparison can be used to prove that while one group came to a new country to work, other minorities are unscrupulous benefit shoppers (Fox 2013, 1879). Similarly, my interviewees used these linguistic strategies of contrast to create an image of themselves as good immigrants and/or to distance themselves from other social groups (cf. Snow and Anderson 1987; Alho and Sippola 2018).

Negotiating membership and sameness: different shades of discrimination

Despite the large number of Estonians in Finland, they have been described as an invisible minority (Lagerspetz 2020, 134–135). This is partly because there are no visible differences with which to categorise Estonians as different, and in many cases they also speak fluent Finnish. According to a survey conducted in 2009, as many as 68% of Estonian migrants in Finland are fluent in Finnish, with 57% in daily contact with Finns (Anniste 2014, 21). When negotiating membership and sameness in Finland, they thus have the possibility to choose the strategy of invisibility, either ignoring or silencing difference (see Giralt 2011). Maintaining this invisible position can protect against othering experiences and seems to suit many Estonians. They would not like to be mistaken for immigrants, or act like them by demanding (special) services from society, despite the fact that this risks not requesting help when it is truly needed.

For example, when meeting officials Estonians often do not ask for a translator, even though using this service would be helpful. Additionally, as compared to other big immigrant groups, the percentage of Estonian school children studying their mother tongue at school is smaller (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). A clue as to why this behaviour should exist can be found when one takes into consideration the experiences of co-existence between Russians and Estonians in Estonia. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, who has studied ethnic interaction in Tallinn, the multi-ethnic capital of Estonia, observes that ethnicity is usually rather silenced than amplified as part of Tallinn's everyday life (Seljamaa 2016). As my research has shown, Estonians tend to follow a similar pattern when relocating to Finland: they simply do not want to make too much fuss.

Estonians cherish their Estonian identity in the private sphere and practise it through certain valued cultural activities. In addition, due to the ease of travel they often visit Estonia and use cultural services there (Lagerspetz 2011). However, the pressure to assimilate into Finnish culture is strong among Estonians living or working in Finland. When I asked one interviewee whether he had encountered bad attitudes in Finland, he reminded me of the treatment that Russians have met in Estonia, a comparison that shows that this behaviour is not typical only to Finns:

There is racism in Finland to a certain extent, I would even say quite a lot. [...] But this hasn't caused me any obstacles, I didn't have any problems because of that. But Finns do treat Estonians like second-class citizens. But this is exactly the same way we Estonians treat Russians in Estonia.

(Man, 40)

Sometimes it is a question of society not acknowledging their qualification, and the same has happened to people returning to Estonia. Finding a job corresponding to their education and work experience is hard and makes relocation more difficult, in both directions.

Although I have finished the university education in Estonia, it doesn't count here, here I'm worth zero. In Estonia I was a high-level director, here a sales agent in a brand boutique.

(Woman, 43)

According to some research participants, having a foreign family name can also hamper the search for a job, although it is also true that Estonians rank high in the immigrant hierarchy in Finland (Jaakkola 2009, 53; Koskela 2014). Interviewees reported that they felt welcome, at least from a pragmatic perspective: "[Finns] understood that since they don't bother doing [certain work] themselves, Estonians come and do it for them." (Man, 42). As one 32-year-old woman said when I asked about her treatment in Finland, people do sometimes stare at her when she speaks Estonian in the shops, but she only feels uncomfortable in public when speaking Russian:

When I am alone or with my family, I haven't experienced racism or people glowering at me. But as soon as I am with Russians or start to talk in Russian wherever, in public swimming pools, the metro, then I've experienced that. [...] But when I'm alone I haven't had any bad experiences. Maybe because I've tried to communicate as well as possible, and in Finnish as much as possible.

(Woman, 32)

The implicit assumption behind this statement is that the newcomer him/herself should behave in a certain way to be more easily accepted. At the same time, as one interviewee states, it does not always matter what you do or do not do. According to him, in the construction sector there is no difference between the attitude towards Estonians and Russians: "for them, we are both similarly immigrants" (Man, 40). To a certain extent, interviewees also reported feelings of nonbelonging. After living in Finland for 12 years, one 19-year-old interviewee was planning to move back to Estonia. As a reason for her return, she said, "I never felt Finland is a home for me. [...] it never was my thing somehow".

Although interviewees consider Finland a multicultural and tolerant society—as compared to Estonia—they have said that discrimination does exist in both countries, it just takes different forms. Interviewees compared the ways racism plays out in Finland and Estonia. According to many of them, in Finland people make more of an effort to be "politically correct", meaning that Finns are often not openly racist, but rather discrimination is better hidden. As the doctor whose interview I summarised earlier in the article claims, "Finns never say it straight to your face", rather it transpires in everyday situations that Estonians are classified as somehow lower class people, as Eastern Europeans, which brings associations with negative traits. She feels her colleagues refer to her background, when there is a debate at work and they are running out of medical arguments:

I realised that when we are arguing, discussing a difficult case, and everyone has their own opinion, then when presenting medical arguments is no longer enough, they say, "maybe you do this in Eastern Europe". Even after seven years, they know who I am, don't they? This is extremely insulting.

(Woman, 43)

This illustrates how belonging is never entirely about migrants' subjective feelings of fitting in or not, but also about how others define who belongs. Membership must be validated by the wider community or group to which one aspires to belong (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523). Derogatory statements can affect people's sense of belonging, and made some of the interviewees feel they are still not full members of Finnish society. As one 36-year-old man reports, he has a strong antipathy towards Finland and Finns:

They still treat you like a second-class person, since even when an employer can choose who he will send to do a bad task, Estonians are his first choice.

Let's say the work that needs to be done on Friday evening, it is Estonians who are sent to do it. They are not even asked whether they would like to travel home. Finns drop their tools already at 3 pm. Put their hammer down and simply walk away. And it is Estonians who need to stay and finish the job since, after all, they are dutiful, slightly slavish and they will finish the work.

(Man, 36)

Although the passport one holds does not make a big difference, both Estonia and Finland being EU countries, the discrimination some people have experienced has made them consider applying for Finnish citizenship. For many it seemed that acquiring Finnish citizenship would help them live better and more secure lives in Finland. Interviewees mentioned wanting to make an application "to be on the safe side", "because of the kid(s)" or "to increase opportunities". In principle, multiple citizenship is not permitted according to Estonian law and the acceptance of the citizenship of another state entails the loss of Estonian citizenship. However, a person who has had Estonian citizenship from birth is not required to give up Estonian citizenship.

Juxtaposing Estonian and Finnish Societies and Cultures

On one hand, there is willingness among the interviewees to integrate into Finnish society and to stay unnoticeable. As shown above, there is also a tendency to stress the relative similarity of Finns and Estonians. On the other hand, people do constantly make everyday comparisons between the two societies and peoples, pointing out the differences. The evaluations people give of Finnish and Estonian societies depend on their future plans and can also change with interview context. Often these comparisons show the orientation of the interviewees—whether they are happy with their lives in Finland or are considering relocation. In this 32-year-old woman's account, Finland is depicted in a positive way. Her family is content with their living conditions in Finland.

But Estonian kindergarten was so big, and it was there in Lasnamäe [the most populous district of Tallinn], between big apartment blocks, and there was not too much to do there in the playground. Whirl and twirl and climb, and there was a big accident after we left. Here [in Finland] it is simply so beautiful, and the kindergarten is here just at the end of the street, next to the forest. One day there were rabbits in the playground and it is more beautiful here. So yes, we are satisfied.

(Woman, 32)

There are many traits in Finnish society that research participants appreciate, or have learned to appreciate, while living in Finland, including the more relaxed work culture. In addition, they often point out some Finnish customs that for them are strange or unfamiliar—like wearing socks at school instead of shoes or slippers. To some extent these are minor differences, related to the materialities of everyday life. Here comparison serves as a practical aid to successful management of everyday

tasks, and as a way of informing newcomers of different practices, for example at school or in the workplace. Some comparisons touch the bodily aspects of everyday life, and, for example, dislike of Finnish food or mistrust of or disappointment in local healthcare services are more difficult to overcome. Many families do indeed bring food with them from Estonia, or where possible plan visits to the doctors during a trip home (see Siim 2020).

Some of the differences interviewees pointed out seem to carry deeper meaning and are related to questions of identity and belonging. As Stuart Hall (2000, 234) has written, all identity terms depend on marking their limits: we define ourselves in terms of what we are not, as much as in terms of what we are. In the context of relocation, identities are given greater attention and negotiated anew in relation to different others and different places. Families who have moved to Finland from Estonia have mentioned the differences in the relations between family members. They have stressed the warmth and closeness of family relations in their families, as compared to typical Finnish families. Like Pille, they feel that there is somehow less intimacy and care within Finnish families:

I virtually haven't seen such a thing as I have with my child or like you see in Estonia, that you kiss and hug all the time, like here everything is very distant. I am your mother and you are my child and that's all. That kind of intimacy, and of course there are exceptions, but I'm thinking about the general picture, that such family warmth or intimacy [I have not seen], also between women and men, mother and father; everything is very formal.

(Woman, 30)

When talking about Estonian and Finnish societies and families, interviewees also highlighted differences in the understandings of the roles and positions of men and women. As Mahler and Pessar (2001, 442) have put it, people do "gender work" in the transnational context, using practices and discourses to negotiate relationships and notions of masculinity and femininity.

Socially desirable masculinity in Estonia entails an image of a man as having 'golden hands,' i.e. someone who works hard and finds solutions to all kinds of practical problems. However, it is women who are given much more attention in the statements of the interviewees. Finnish women in particular, their appearance and behaviour, are the centre of much critical attention. As Kairi pointed out in her interview, summarised in the beginning of the article, Estonian women really know how to take care of their appearance. Many interviewees implied that in Finland men and women are "too equal", something that is seen as a negative trend.

In transnational contexts, leaning on gender roles typical to one's own culture can give migrants strength and support in a new cultural environment. However, thanks to the influence of the surrounding society these roles can also be contested and negotiated. In the case of Estonians in Finland, both of these tendencies are discernible. For example, interviewees have noted the changing role of fathers, which is partly thanks to the shorter working day that is typical to Finland and sometimes also because of

missing support from grandparents or other social networks. As Telve (2019, 49) has stated based on her research on cross-border commuters, Estonian men who have worked in Finland for some time are eager to spend time with their family and are more comfortable being a family-oriented father, seeing it as a benefit. As this 42-year old woman says, people want to spend more time with their families in Finland:

I have quite many acquaintances who said they came in order to be able to spend more time with their children. In Estonia it is probably work, work, work, away from home all the time. And for me it feels that actually families who have come here go out with the children more often, or spend more time together. It now struck me that maybe this is partly due to the fact that people don't have grandmothers and things here, and so have fewer places to take their kids, or can't go out alone without them. [...] So we could say that fathers here take parental leave, they are often at home with the kids. Mothers go to work and the father is at home with the baby.

(Woman, 42)

Estonia: Home country or foreign land?

During the interviews I also touched on what dreams people had for the future—did they see themselves living in Finland, Estonia, or somewhere else? Some of the interviewees had not never left Estonia for good, while some had returned or planned to do so when they retired. However, some of the interviewees had built their homes in Finland and said they did not want to drag their children back and forth between the two countries. Some were afraid they had become estranged from Estonian working culture. Both the person and Estonian society had changed too much to make a return possible. Dreams of the future also included the idea of living in a warmer climate. When I asked a 32-year-old woman whether she had plans to return to Estonia, this is how she answered:

To Estonia definitely no. Rather to a warm country. [...] we'll see how the children do at school, that is most important. If they don't have any problems here, then we would rather remain here while they grow up. But after that, certainly somewhere south, somewhere south.

(Woman, 32)

When pondering their future place of residence, interviewees outlined the pros and cons of living in each place to make their decisions plausible. When talking about the timing of family movement, parents with children often mentioned children's schooling as an important factor affecting their decision. School systems and related everyday practices were constantly compared, and usually the Estonian curriculum was regarded as more demanding while the Finnish system gave the child more responsibility. Families did not usually consider returning permanently to Estonia before the children had finished school because they felt the different emphases in the school systems made relocation complicated for school-age children (see Assmuth and Siim 2018).

However, for some interviewees there were painful memories associated with Estonia. Often these related to the very reasons they had to leave in the first place, and why they were currently happy with their lives in Finland:

Just like all around the world, certain norms have taken shape in society. And if you, for some reason, don't fit into these norms, you are an exception. Society was not ready to support and accept [us] as we were. There were expectations we could not meet. The reason for leaving Estonia was that we did not belong to and could not meet these norms. The only right decision was to leave.

(Woman, 45)

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, weak social security makes the position of the Estonian workforce highly vulnerable. Many have felt that working in Finland was the only option for them, and in the cases of some single mothers who had difficulties making ends meet, a survival strategy. For these women, living transnationally is a way of coping with the disinvestment of the state in social support (Coe et al. 2011, 10; Schmalzbauer 2004). The comparison in the story quoted immediately above becomes more explicit later on, when she explains how she felt she was taken care of in Finland:

When I was starting a new life in Finland, with all the difficulties and uncertainty, very quickly a friend offered a helping hand. This time the friend was the state of Finland. We received all the decisions and answers, saying that we would live here for real, and were accepted the way we were on an equal basis with those who were born here. The basic things one needs for life (an apartment, food) were organised by the social welfare office. Finally, a feeling of security arrived, from an economic point of view.

(Woman, 45)

The interviewee justifies her decision to relocate by contrasting two societies and their readiness to help residents in need of help. Belonging is related to a feeling of security, a sense of being accepted. When reflecting on modes of being-at-home and talking about their plans for the future, interviewees also positioned themselves vis-à-vis dominant attitudes and discourses in Estonia, dismantling their own and others' understandings of their relationship to place(s). In the kind of situation described above, the line between voluntary and involuntary migration is quite thin. For many, relocation entails contradictory feelings—they do not feel they really had the possibility to choose. However, in Estonia people leaving to work abroad are often referred to as “convenience migrants” (*mugavuspagulased*), a term introduced by Estonian politician Tõnis Lukas in 2014 (ERR, 21/08/2014). He stated that the current wave of people leaving for “greener pastures” does so out of convenience and even out of laziness, and that these people are not comparable to “real refugees”, people who had to leave the country in 1944. Since then, this term has been widely used and discussed in Estonia. It offends many of the interviewees: because of prevailing attitudes such as this a possible return to Estonia would entail challenges in both emotional and practical terms.

The article has looked at the ways the interviewed Estonians use comparison as a strategic resource that constructs and makes sense of belonging in relation to homeland, to the current place of residence, and to different others. Interviewees drew on discourses of difference to assert and defend their, in a way relatively privileged but still precarious, positions in Finland, highlighting their own belonging in opposition to the (migrant) Other (cf. Guðjónsdóttir 2014, 179). Comparison as a linguistic strategy can thus be seen to be used when responding to the prevailing, and changing, societal discourses and to positions related to migrants and migration, both in Estonia and in Finland. The study has shown that whether comparison is more implicit or explicit, its role is nevertheless essential in order to justify the chosen life trajectory and to create similarity by highlighting one's difference to others (cf. Lundström 2010, 71). The stories analysed do more than signify the values and identities of particular individuals or groups. They also enable people to contest articulations of morality and blame in broader societal contexts (cf. Bock and Horigan 2015, 65).

Notes

- 1 I use pseudonyms when referring to the interviewees. Interview transcripts were translated from Estonian or Finnish to English by the author and were lightly edited to increase readability.
- 2 The work has been done as a part of following research projects: Families on the Move: Children's Perspectives on Migration in Europe (funded by the Kone Foundation, 2012–2014; PI Prof. Laura Assmuth, University of Eastern Finland); Inequalities of Mobility: Relatedness and Belonging of Transnational Families in the Nordic Migration Space (Academy of Finland, 2015–2019; PI Laura Assmuth); and Performative Negotiations of Belonging in Contemporary Estonia (Estonian Research Council, 2018–2021, PI Dr Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, University of Tartu).
- 3 One of the interviews was conducted by Laura Assmuth.

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