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# The Study of Immigrant Youth in Finland <sup>1</sup>

The study of immigrant youth in Finland has been growing at a steady pace since the turn of the 2000s, but the topic is still somewhat peripheral in the broader context of national ethnic and migration studies. This is due to the fact that Finland became an immigration society at the turn of the 1990s, and the bulk of migration research has so far been focusing on integration patterns of the first generation, which is dominated by adults in the working age. As the growing second generation is increasingly approaching adulthood, also the focus has slightly shifted to questions of belonging, identity, school performance, etc. of young people of immigrant background.

Current research on immigrant youth is dominated by qualitative studies, and there is a lack of quantitative research that would contribute to the contextualisation of research findings. This article describes the main features of immigrants in Finland as well as provides an analysis of existing research, its key-findings and future challenges regarding immigrant youth in the country.

## 1 Immigration to Finland

Finland was a country of emigration in the post World War II period and turned into a country of immigration at the turn of the 1990s. The change was not planned or anticipated, but rather turned out to be an effect of opening to the global economy in the late 1980s, changed post Cold War geopolitics since 1991, entry to the European Union in 1995 and the eventual growth of global mobility on all fronts of society. The sudden opening to international migration streams has consisted, among others, of ethnic return migration from the former Soviet Union, marriage migration from many parts of the world,

labour migration from several countries as well as increasing numbers of international students, asylum seekers and refugees from around the world.

Finnish immigration policies were relaxed due to the European unification process and new integration policies based on multiculturalism were developed in the late 1990s, much of which was originally borrowed from Sweden. However, holistic policies towards increased global mobility or the new immigrant presence have not emerged, and issues have been solved case by case on an ad hoc basis, despite of government's efforts to create explicit immigration and integration policy.

The number of foreign born rose from 65 000 in 1990 to 219 000 in 2008, that is from 1.3 to 4.1 per cent of the total population. Two-thirds of the immigrants have arrived from Europe, especially from the areas of the former Soviet Union and Sweden, but also non-European migration has been on the rise. The five largest countries of origin of migrants were the former Soviet Union (most notably Russia and Estonia), Sweden, Somalia, China and former Yugoslavia.

By far the main reasons of entry have been marriage and family reunification. Migrants are concentrated in metropolitan areas, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan region, where they already constitute a visible minority and a contested area of urban policy. At the time of entry, one-fourth of immigrants have been underage, and regarding the whole stock of foreign born about fifteen per cent still were in 2008. The size of the second generation, including children of mixed marriages, was 121 000 in December 2007. Almost ninety per cent of the second generation was under the age of 25 in 2007. Altogether, the first and

second generations counted 6.4 per cent of the total population in 2008.

If young people are defined as those under the age of 25, then the amount of first and second generation immigrant youth was approximately 160 000 people in 2007. Questions related to immigrant youth are overwhelmingly urban ones, however, these are still poorly addressed in public policy and public consciousness. The topic is on the rise, mainly due to some alarming news from the educational system and the mediatisation of a few individual incidents relating to crime and other social problems among migrant youth.

## Existing Research on immigrant youth

The study of immigrant youth has taken pace during the last ten years. The research community has mainly emerged around the Finnish Youth Research Network. The studies are largely qualitative case studies, often focusing on identity, discrimination, integration, friendship, leisure time, school, citizenship, multiculturalism and youth culture. The main academic disciplines involved have been sociology, anthropology, social psychology, education and religious studies. Most of the studies have been conducted by early career researchers, focussing on the most stigmatised ethnic groups, and are written in the Finnish language.

A first key study was a collected volume edited by Päivi Harinen, *Kamppailuja jäsenyyksistä* ("Struggles of Belonging", 2003), that gathered much of the early research, where the notion of 'belonging' served as the guiding theme on a broad variety of topics. The authors dismantled young people's identity negotiations, friendship relations and mutual engagements in social contexts where ethnic difference was a recent phenomenon. The initial interest was followed by further projects, the latest of which is the Changing Civil Society: Multiculturalism, Young People and the Finnish Civic Culture Project (2008–2010, Academy of Finland) that focuses

on the experiences of an emerging multicultural youth.

Several doctoral dissertations have focused more deeply in particular cases. Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo's study of young Somalis in formal education and Petri Hautaniemi's thesis on Somali boys in Finnish youth culture are examples of qualitative research aiming to grasp the complex process of inclusion and exclusion in relation to mainstream society in the formative years of young migrants. Both of these studies were boosted by the first ever major research programme on immigration by the Academy of Finland: SYREENI – Marginalisation, Inequality and Ethnic Relations in Finland (2001–2003). Anna Rastas' dissertation of experiences of discrimination and racism among children of mixed marriages and international adoptees widens existing studies' focus on a few ethnic groups. Sanna Iskanius' thesis in applied linguistics focuses on the linguistic identity of Russian origin youth, and she shows how widely their ethnic identifications vary.

*The Finnish Journal of Youth Research* published by the Youth Research Network serves as one of the key publication forums and has featured several articles on young immigrants. For instance, a thematic issue on Muslim youth (3/2009) brought forward both national and international contributions that highlight the role of religion among young immigrant Muslims. Discussion related to crafting Muslim lives as a minority group, constant negotiations between the role of culture and religion, as well as associating religiousness with ethnic identities were central themes that correspond with international developments. Also religion's role as an instrument to get favourable treatment was highlighted. This brings forth the ambivalent nature and instrumentation of identities among young immigrants and in their relationship to adults.

Another collected contribution was formed around the European Social Fund funded MONIKKO Project that focused on gender equality

and diversity in work organizations. While initially focusing on labour market success of immigrant women, the project brought together a range of issues related family dynamics, raising children, gender issues, identities and transnational family lives. The key-results were published in *Maahanmuuttajaiset* ("Immigrant Women", 2007) edited by Tuomas Martikainen and Marja Tiilikainen. Migrant families are pressured between everyday concerns of economic survival, the raising of children in a new environment and sometimes hostile attitudes from the majority population. As relations between parents may be under stress, one-parent households are vastly more common among certain ethnic groups than in the majority population.

Somali, Russian, Estonian and Vietnamese households have up to double as many single-parent families as the national average, but also the opposite is true for many, including people from China, the Indian subcontinent and Muslim majority societies. The long term consequences of single-parenthood have not been addressed at all in research so far.

Social psychologists have done extensive studies on acculturation and integration of immigrants, including young migrants. Social psychologists also use more often than other researchers quantitative methods and survey material.

For example, Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti's studies on the acculturation of Russian-speaking immigrant adolescents in Finland focus on ethnic identifications and how family relations develop over time. Another example is Liisa Kosonen's longitudinal work on young Vietnamese socio-cultural adaptation processes. Both of these studies suggest the importance of family resources for acculturation.

Research on immigrant youth in school and education is increasingly visible. The Finnish National Board of Education has also produced a large number of reports, which have noted that people of non-EU migrant background are more often at risk not to

succeed in their education. A major report published in 2008 brings forth the complexity of situations for various groups and identifies problems in the transition to next levels of education, where the dropout rate for immigrant youth is higher than average. An example of other type of study is Sirpa Lappalainen's thesis on nationalism, ethnicity and gender in preschool that takes up how children create gendered, ethnic and other identities.

Research on immigrant youth is increasing, and as the early career researchers find their places in the academia, it can be expected that its role will increase in the coming years. Among the research in process could be mentioned a forthcoming edited volume on immigrant generations that will sum up much of the research done during the first decade of the 2000s. Edited by Tuomas Martikainen and Lotta Haikkola, the volume will provide a broad overview of immigrant youth at school, in relation to youth culture, on linguistic developments and family dynamics. The volume is scheduled to be published in winter 2010.

### ③ Key findings

Bearing in mind the restrictions of available data, some key findings of research have emerged. A clear distinction should be made between developments on an individual and a group level. Whereas case studies focusing on individuals show a remarkable diversity of experiences, constant negotiations, identity constructs, educational success, etc., group level developments show marked distinctions between various ethnic groups. To what extent these can be explained by aggregate characteristics in socio-economic background, reason of migration, experiences of discrimination, etc. is not always clear, even though those would likely explain most of the differences in outcomes, while the remaining part is to some extent related to majority's attitudes that vary regarding the group in question.

The following key findings are presented as relating to 1) family dynamics, 2) an emerging racial, ethnic and religious hierarchy and stigma, 3) multiple, intersecting negotiations of difference and 4) the growing impact of migrant youth.

① The importance of family grows for many immigrants in the new country of settlement, because of the stress on social relations that migration causes. Hence, **family dynamics** affecting young immigrants are a key issue. This is evident in **value discourses** among migrants, where the family is situated at the centre, often in perceived sharp contrast with the majority population, whose family ties are seen as lax. In spite of the importance of family, many children of immigrants are living in **transnational and/or single-parent families**, but this varies dramatically between people from different countries of origin. Current research does not allow us to be very precise about the situation, but it seems to be based on family reunification policy, discrimination in the labour market leading to further migration of one spouse, family dynamics in mixed marriages and cultural differences in the rate of divorce. For instance, Somalis and Russians have about double levels of single-parent households in contrast to the national average. The implications of this to their children are currently unknown. It is also documented that some migrant children and parents are living in different countries, and that sending of children abroad is sometimes used as a disciplinary measure for misbehaviour in Finland.

② Various national and ethnic groups hold highly different positions in the national ethnic hierarchy and also in terms of **emerging patterns of ethnic stigma and marginalisation**. The most stigmatised ethnic groups are the Somalis and Russians. Also Muslim immigrants in general experience a high degree of stigmatisation, but that seems to vary between ethnic groups based on the visibility of their faith. This means that skin colour, dress, culture and religion have emerged as, at least to some extent, new social distinctions and providers of stigma in Finland.

This contrasts with traditional nationalism that focused on language as the key separating feature of identity. It remains to be seen how this new emerging racial, ethnic and religious hierarchy develops, but there are signs that immigrant discourses are increasingly focusing on culture and religion. The debates are also gendered.

③ Most of the research stresses the **openness of the existing situation**, even though there are signs of more permanent marginalisation among some ethnic groups, especially among those of refugee and asylum background as well as among a segment of Russian origin families and youth. The openness is related to the relative newness and until recently small scope of immigration, but even ongoing negotiations of social location, identity and representation. Young people show a remarkable ability to **instrumentalise** their self-attained or superimposed identities, and the **intersectionality** of these is in the centre of many current analyses. Obviously the scope for room of manoeuvre is differs between groups, but it still does not undermine that new hierarchies are in their formative phase.

④ **The role and impact of migrant youth is growing** because of continuing migration and the aging of the second generation. As the second generation will in large numbers enter secondary education and working life in the 2010s, we can expect that its visibility in public life will grow. The process will most likely raise significant political and public discussions, as has been the case in other post-war immigration societies. Simultaneously with rising voices for recognition a parallel trend may appear, and where a segment of people of immigrant origin will not be able to overcome their parents' disadvantaged social position, leading to debates on marginalisation as a generational development.

#### ④ Future Challenges

Whereas current research focuses on several important areas, including discrimination, citizenship and education, some central concerns

have been only marginally addressed. First and foremost is the lack of demographic and survey data to contextualise qualitative research findings. The results of this are evident in the still sloppy usage of the category of 'immigrant youth' that does not distinguish between the age of migration, life stage and generational status as of key importance in integration patterns among all migrants and their offspring as forcefully argued by Rubén Rumbaut and others. Hence, basic demographic data together with focused surveys would help to distinguish various integration trajectories among young people. Unfortunately, Finland was not a part of the large European TIES Project that aims to overcome these problems on a continental level.

Such elementary data is needed for the apparently largest research challenge of the next ten to twenty years, when the second generation enters secondary education and working life en masse as well as forms families. It is at this stage, when the long-time effects international migration for local communities, social cohesion and ethnic hierarchies will be formed. In order to follow that development a strong base of knowledge and data is essential. Otherwise, there is a danger of creating policy on anecdotal evidence based on mediated social problems. This general concern relates to diverse, more specific research issues, including transnational partnerships for some ethnic minority groups, migrant youth at the labour market and analyses of migration and integration policy.

To summarise, Finnish research on migrant youth has been steadily growing and addressing many key issues, but it has had a bias of interest towards some ethnic groups, usually the visible minorities, and it is strongly based on a social scientific qualitative tradition, sometimes neglecting quantitative approaches. Its main challenge is to broaden its scope and to find funding for major surveys, as well as to stay sensitive for emerging topics that will shape the future of migrant origin population in Finland for the next decade or two.

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## Note

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## Etude des jeunes migrants en Finlande

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La recherche actuelle sur les jeunes migrants consiste essentiellement en des études qualitatives, et les études quantitatives, qui pourraient contribuer à replacer dans leur contexte les résultats de la recherche, font cruellement défaut. Cet article présente les principales caractéristiques des migrants en Finlande, une analyse de la recherche existante et de ses résultats clés, ainsi que les futurs défis que vont devoir relever les jeunes migrants dans le pays.

Les sociologues ont effectué des recherches approfondies sur l'acculturation et l'intégration des migrants, y compris les jeunes migrants. Plus que les autres, les sociologues utilisent souvent des méthodes de recherche quantitatives et du matériel d'enquête.

La recherche sur les jeunes migrants à l'école et dans l'éducation acquiert une visibilité de plus en plus grande. Le Conseil national finlandais de l'éducation a également produit quantité de rapports qui ont mis en évidence que les individus d'antécédents migrants ne venant pas

des pays de l'UE sont plus souvent exposés au risque d'échouer dans leur parcours éducatif. Un rapport essentiel, publié en 2008, présente la complexité de la situation pour divers groupes et identifie les problèmes qui se posent dans le passage aux niveaux supérieurs de l'éducation, où le taux d'abandon scolaire des jeunes migrants est supérieur à la moyenne.

La recherche finlandaise sur les jeunes migrants s'est progressivement intensifiée et ouverte à des questions clés. Pour autant, elle souffre d'un parti pris envers certains groupes ethniques, généralement les minorités les plus visibles, et repose largement sur une tradition qualitative des sciences humaines qui tend parfois à négliger les approches quantitatives. Le principal défi qu'elle doit relever consiste à élargir sa portée et à trouver des financements pour des études de grande envergure, ainsi que de rester à l'écoute des thèmes émergents qui façonneront l'avenir de la population migrante en Finlande pour la prochaine voire les deux prochaines décennies.

## Die Forschung über jugendliche Migranten in Finnland

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Die aktuelle Forschung zu jugendlichen Migranten wird beherrscht von qualitativen Studien, und es fehlt die quantitative Forschung, die einen Beitrag zur Kontextualisierung der Forschungsergebnisse leisten könnte. Dieser Artikel beschreibt die Hauptmerkmale von Migranten in Finnland und liefert eine Analyse der vorhandenen Studien, zentralen Ergebnissen und künftigen Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit jugendlichen Migranten in Finnland.

Sozialpsychologen haben umfangreiche Studien zur Akkulturation und Integration von Migranten und auch jugendlichen Migranten durchgeführt. Sozialpsychologen setzen quantitative Methoden und Befragungsmaterialien auch häufiger ein als andere Wissenschaftler.

Die Forschung zu jungen Migranten in Schule und Bildung wird immer stärker sichtbar. Die Finnische Nationale Bildungsbehörde (Finnish National Board of Education) hat ebenfalls eine große Zahl von Berichten mit der Feststellung herausgegeben, dass Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund aus EU-Drittstaaten ein

größeres Risiko haben, ihre Bildung ohne Erfolg abzuschließen. Ein 2008 veröffentlichter großer Bericht präsentiert die Komplexität der Situation verschiedener Gruppen und identifiziert Probleme beim Übergang auf höhere Bildungsebenen, wo die Abbrecherquote bei jungen Migranten überdurchschnittlich hoch ist.

Die finnische Forschung zu jungen Migranten verzeichnet ein stetiges Wachstum und befasst sich mit vielen zentralen Fragen, aber das Forschungsinteresse konzentriert sich einseitig auf einige ethnische Gruppen, also normalerweise die stärker sichtbaren Minderheiten, und stützt sich stark auf eine qualitative Tradition der Sozialwissenschaften, wobei sie die quantitativen Ansätze manchmal vernachlässigt. Ihre größte Herausforderung besteht darin, ihren Umfang zu erweitern und Finanzmittel für große Befragungen zu finden, wobei sie gleichzeitig sich ihre Sensibilität für sich neu herausbildende Themen erhalten muss, die die Zukunft der in Finnland lebenden Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund in den nächsten 10 oder 20 Jahren bestimmen werden.