

FATEFUL WELL-BEING: *Childhood and Youth Transitions Among Latvian Women in Finland*

Aija Lulle^{1*}, Agnese Bankovska^{2**}

¹ Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

² University of Helsinki, Helsinki

* E-mail: a.lulle@lboro.ac.uk

** E-mail: agnese.bankovska@helsinki.fi

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Abstract


In this article we investigate what happens to the children who are brought to a new country along with their parents, and how they, now young adults, narrate the 'self' as a migrant child and adolescent in different temporal and spatial contexts. We draw on five long narrative interviews with young women who were born in Latvia and came to Finland during their childhood. For our analysis of these narratives, we coin a notion of 'fateful well-being'. The research participants' challenges as child migrants, where geographical displacement was compounded by language changes and discontinuities in schooling, as well as ruptures with family members and friends, are revalued and appropriated through the self-development skills of reflexive narration. Within the concept of fateful well-being, youth transitions involve both constrained agency and choices towards well-being. We argue that reconciling difficulties is a vital part of fateful well-being.

Keywords

youth transitions • fateful well-being • narrative analysis • Finland • Latvian child migrants

Introduction

Child migration is increasingly approached from the viewpoints of children and their families, emphasising children's agency and experiences during migration (for reviews, see Ni Laoire *et al.* 2011). Children, of course, have considerable agency. Their influence over parents and peers shifts considerably over the span of their childhood, especially when children stop speaking one language when the family moves; hence, they may protest against parental choices of residence (Lulle 2018). And yet, there are valid warnings of

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overemphasising migrant children's agency because childhood is normatively structured (Coe *et al.* 2011).

Another relevant context needs to be taken into account: modern families are not only nuclear, but they are also not bounded within one nation-state. It is important to assess shifting cultural norms around family migration in order to understand the choices that children within these families make (Mazzucato & Schans 2011: 708; Van Geel & Mazzucato 2017). While migrant children's well-being has been at the core of policies and research, especially during the past decade, little is actually known about how mobility-related well-being changes during childhood affect youth transitions. Traditionally, youth transitions are seen as chronological stages. Three stages are the most prominent: first, from education to work; second, from non-employment or unemployment to stable employment; and third, from youth to full adulthood (Arnett 2004). The latter is broadly understood as establishing one's own home, own family and independence. However, in terms of flexibilisation of education and labour markets, youth transitions become more diverse – ruptured, reversed, delayed and repeated (Hörschelmann 2011). Migration can coincide with transitions and can complicate chronologically imagined life course transitions geographically. While interactions between youth mobility and transitions are more studied (King 2018), clearly, there is a need for research to understand the complex impacts of migration on young people who experienced migration in childhood.

Our contribution to this research need is to put forward the notion of 'fateful well-being', which we understand as pursuing a deeply satisfying life in the midst of constraints and choices in young persons' lives. We devote the following theoretical sections to explain how we arrived at this notion. Our study is based on qualitative analysis of five accounts of research participants who moved from Latvia to Finland when they were children. This small-number study is part of the long-term research work on children and family migration between Latvia and Finland under two Finland-funded projects.¹ All five are women and gave their interviews as adults, looking back to their own childhood experiences and, as we call it here, reconciling them with that child migrant in their own narratives. Methodological opportunities and limitations are explained in the sections on methods and participants. In the analytical sections throughout the article, we follow their voices on how today's young adults reflect on their past events, as well as their attempts to pursue psychosocial well-being in childhood and now. Hence, our overarching question is: *How do children and young adults pursue well-being in the context of constraints and choices?*

Theorising narration of well-being and youth transitions

According to Wright (2012: 10), subjective well-being is related to needs for autonomy, competency and meaningful relationships, in addition to having goals of personal growth and greater good for others, e.g. family members, especially the next generation, even if this involves intergenerational constraints (Punch 2014). Incorporating a clear psychosocial component, subjective well-being is also related to experience and ideas of what it means

to 'live well' for migrants and for people they care for. Psychosocial 'being well' involves psychological states such as self-esteem and relationships, and it links individual experiences to the broader social realm. Such psychosocial states are culturally embedded understandings where frames of reference are place based and can become transformed during the migration process (Ryan, Huta & Deci 2008).

Wright (2012: 5, 52–55) names language skills as being functional to well-being: without language skills, welfare, work or living arrangements are hard to access; and, conceptually, it is hard for subjective well-being to take place. Throughout her research on Peruvian migrants in London and Madrid, Wright reiterates that both functional and subjective dimensions are overlapping and feed into each other. However, we need to take into account that, firstly, Wright studied adults; and secondly, her list of well-being needs is not exhaustive. In different geographical and social settings, and, as in our case, with different demographic profiles, additional needs may turn out to be more important in order to pursue a better life during migration.

When it comes to youth transitions, inspired (and convinced) by Hörschelmann (2011) and Worth (2009), we understand such transitions in migrant lives not as steady and linear trajectories but rather as 'ruptures' occurring during the process of 'becoming'. When moving from one place to another, relationships such as friendships and, often, family relations go through ruptures. This happens with language learning and usage too. Besides, these are often entwined, especially if former friends and family members live in a different language environment and children may stop speaking an earlier-learned language while learning a new one. This may occur either as a 'natural' process guided by the child or may be encouraged by the parents and/or school environment in order to accelerate integration in the new society. Hence, there is a tension between studies that stress on children and young people's reflective agency to make mobility and other choices (e.g. Saar 2017) on the one hand and other studies that foreground the constraints of legal and institutional relations on children's agency on the other (Coe *et al.* 2011). Finally, the growing numbers of mobile youth in Europe have created a need for new theorisations of the relatively 'free' mobilities of youth (Cairns 2014; King 2018). While structural constraints such as language barriers and national labour market systems exist, this relative freedom of mobility has actually created multi-sited relations. The family is the core site of such relations.

Fateful well-being

The well-being approach emphasises what people need to live well and in a satisfying way, even if this involves temporary hardships (Wright 2012). Our participants reflected on the fundamental transitions and decisive moments that took place when their capability to 'choose' migration or a mobile life was rather constrained by parental choices. According to Coe *et al.* (2011), children have considerable agency in expressing and pursuing their will. But children's agency is also constrained: usually (at least in Western countries), they must receive education and they are legally dependent. Children cannot make choices during

migration as adults can, especially in terms of where they will live and which languages they will master. This aspect of a constrained agency is at the centre of our inquiry. In order to bridge this gap between constrained agency and a migrant's life, which rather unfolds in a plurality of ruptures and becomings, we need to place these in a broad understanding of modern life courses, as Giddens does in the theory of self-identity in modernity. According to Giddens (1991: 113–114), 'fateful moments' are like crossroads in time and space, where an individual is confronted with situations and events with fateful consequences. These moments require action and evoke reflection. More tellingly, Giddens talks about the previous life settings as 'the protective cocoon' (1991: 113–114), which ruptures so that new paths need to be pursued. Childhood is usually such a cocoon in the life course. 'Native' languages and unquestioned non-migrant identity, too, act as protective cocoons. Migration in childhood cracks it.

Further, adding ideas from autobiographical studies on exile literatures is useful in order to enrich this proposed notion of fateful well-being. Jilani's (2014: 59) literary analysis of Eva Hoffman's and Edward Said's autobiographical writings on exile argues for a space where plurality and different emplacements are recognised as ontologically cohesive. And such a space is a story – autobiographical or a narrative interview, as in our case. As Wiles, Rosenberg and Kearns (2005: 89) suggest, a narrative approach particularly encourages the researcher to take into account interviewees' own reflections. These are reflections on constraining structures and agency, but they are more: while narrating, an interviewee not only reflects on places, and on the self in different places, situations and relations, but she/he also moves back and forth in time and re-evaluates migration during childhood in the light of subsequent youth transitions towards and into adulthood.

Methods

All five research participants analysed in this article were young women, aged from 18 to 35 years at the time of the interviews (in 2014–2015). The gender of the participants helps to provide more consistent analysis on daughter–mother relations. The participants have been selected due to their specific relevance for the theme of the article, being young women whose coming of age has been affected and shaped by their migratory and settling-in experiences. Thus, the selection of the participants became possible through the respective research contexts. Four interviews were conducted in the Helsinki area, as this is the primary location of residence for all participants, while one, with Zanda, was conducted in Latvia, a participant who mainly lives there and travels to Nordic countries for work reasons.

The language of the interviews in all cases, except with the youngest participant Eliza, was Latvian. In the case of Eliza, the language of the interview was English, a 'neutral' language between the interviewer and interviewee, since the former could not communicate enough well in Russian while the participant did not have a strong command of Latvian for fully expressing her experiences. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Latvian was established as the only official language. Language usage diverged sharply along generational and

family lines. With Russian no longer taught at schools as an obligatory language, some children grew up without knowing Russian. Moreover, and along geopolitical lines, the Russian language was associated with the former occupier – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Schmid 2008). But in many ‘mixed’ families in Latvia, children grew up at least bilingual, speaking both Russian and Latvian, yet nationally being Latvians and perceiving Latvia as their familial homeland (Lulle & Jurkane-Hobein 2017). These complicated histories had a notable impact on children’s well-being in Finland, given this country’s own sensitivities. Although Finland was not occupied, it lost a sizeable amount of territory to the USSR. Immigration from Russia intensified in the 1990s and is considerable nowadays.

The interviewees’ experiences of child migration span 3 decades: the oldest participant arrived in Finland in the late 1980s, the second oldest in the late 1990s and the others in the 2000s. We emphasise that our article does not explicitly analyse the structural environment in Finland, nor many normative assumptions on schooling or integration. We let our participants tell the story, and some crucial information on immigration into Finland stays in the background. While Latvia was still part of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and immigrating to a Western country was exceptional, immigration into Finland was also exceptional as there were few immigrants at that time and virtually no historical migration from Latvia. Immigration into Finland was still very low in numbers in the 1990s, while when the younger participants arrived in the 2000s, there were more newcomers. By then, there were special classes for immigrant children with intensive language teaching. In specific cases, schooling in the English language was possible in international schools.

In four cases, the mothers of the participants were divorced, and in three of these, they came to Finland because of their new husbands. In two cases, the mothers came primarily due to work contracts. Accordingly, our interviews are relatively homogeneous in terms of the familial – mother–daughter – relationships during the transitions to Finland. One of the participants moved back to Latvia on her own; the others still resided in Finland at the time of the interviews. All those who stayed continued visiting relatives in Latvia.

Distance in time is crucial for reflexivity as young adults are talking about themselves in a different, child-time, status. In terms of legal independence, those who are 18 years and older are no longer children and legally can say what they want more freely. This formal transition from a child to a young adult was particularly liberating for young persons to give a voice to their migrant experiences in childhood. All interviews were given with explicit consent for research purposes, and all names are pseudonyms to guarantee participants’ anonymity.

We do not aim to claim any representativeness with our study; our main purpose is to give space to the uniqueness of narrative voices and to take these voices seriously. The participants are knowledgeable interpreters of their life experiences. Therefore, we applied a narrative approach to our analysis and coding (Cortazzi 1993; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk 2007). After rereading the interviews several times and revising our research inquiry, we coded the interviews according to the chronological story of migration and transitions. Further, we distinguished the main themes in these narratives: language and relations.

While being cognisant of the fragmentary and complex nature of narratives, we agree with those narrative analysis approaches that emphasise the reflexivity, internal ordering and explaining by a narrator himself/herself – why some facts happen or feelings arose in multi-sited geographies (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns 2005). In the second round of coding, we distinguished the reflective narratives on ruptures of well-being and what participants did in order to pursue better lives. These will be presented in the analytical sections as dimensions that help to construct the notion of ‘fateful well-being’, recognising that uniqueness rather than representativity is the purpose of qualitative narrative analysis. In the meantime, rupture–well-being relations are embedded in social structures, which will also be addressed in our conclusions. Now let us briefly introduce the five research participants.

Introducing the research participants and their migration context

Liene was 35 years old at the time of interview and arrived in Finland when she was almost 9 years old. Her parents are Latvians, but the mother married a Finnish man after moving to Finland. Liene arrived with her mother and went to a Finnish school. She lives in Finland with her children.

Zanda, 27, arrived when she was 11 years old and lived in Finland 4 years. Both parents are Latvians. Zanda also moved back to Latvia on her own. She started studying subjects related to Nordic countries in Latvia where she still lives, and she regularly travel backs to Finland and other Nordic countries.

Alise, 21, was 5½ years old when she moved to Finland because of her mother’s new husband and job in Finland. Alise’s mother and father are Latvians, while the stepfather is Finnish. She studies in Finland, in Finnish.

Jasmine, 22, was 6 years old when she moved to Finland, also because of her mother’s new husband. She comes from a mixed Latvian–Russian family; her father is Russian-speaking. She attended Finnish language schools and remained in Finland. She has a Finnish partner and a child.

Eliza, 18, was 8 years old and moved to Finland due to her mother’s job; she attended an international school with English as the main language of instruction. She comes from a mixed Latvian–Russian family. Her mother is Russian-speaking.

We have provided the basic characteristics of the participants, which are important socio-demographically for the participants’ narratives. None of the narratives include the economic factors prevalent in childhood; psychosocial well-being is the most important context for the participants. We have ordered the narrative extracts according to the internal structures of, firstly, saying what happened (telling facts, recalling feelings and memories), and second, the reflexive reactions of the narrators themselves – interpreting well-being needs in their own words.

Throughout childhood ruptures

We begin with the childhood transitions when the ‘protective cocoon’ of one’s native language in school settings no longer exists, and when a child pursues his/her social self among peers where he/she does not feel included and accepted due to his/her migrant status.

Learning by heart, calculating every step

Zanda (hereafter age at interview and arrival to Finland 27/11) arrived in Finland in the late 1990s. She had attended four grades in Latvia already, where the main language of instruction was Latvian, but the school also had a strong English-language training component. As soon as she arrived in Finland, she went straight into a Finnish school. Zanda recalled that moving to Finland was initially accompanied with a feeling of being lucky – she and parents would work for a time in a prosperous country due to their creative skills. However, her sense of being privileged disappeared on her first day at school. Schooling and language learning were psychologically strenuous. What follows is Zanda’s narrative of her ‘ill-being’ and her attempts to improve her situation.

On the first day, I understood that it is going to be difficult. I did not understand a word. The teacher was friendly, but I was told that everything will be only in Finnish. My fear was indescribable, I have thought about this so many times, round and round. It was one of my biggest childhood traumas.

The narrative of migration as a childhood ‘trauma’ permeates her story. Going to a school without any prior language knowledge was a rupture she was not, and could not be, prepared for. However, equally important in her narrative is her reflections on how she was rethinking and trying to reason what happened to her in childhood. Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, established a single state language – Latvian – so that, after that point, young Latvian pupils rarely, if at all, studied Russian as a foreign language. But many people she met in Finland during her childhood still saw Latvia as the former Soviet Union, or at least as somewhat vaguely Russian. Zanda was placed together with a girl from Russia; supposedly the teachers thought that the girls could speak Russian together since she came from a post-Soviet country. But she did not speak Russian at all. So, the partnership with the Russian girl simply did not work out. Zanda worked hard to crack through the language barrier:

I tried to follow the intonation to understand when somebody tried to address me. I had a small dictionary, and all the time I tried to find words there. I had to read in Finnish, and I read but I did not understand. I had additional Finnish lessons once a week but it was not serious; the teacher spoke only Finnish and I had to guess a Finnish word, and cut and paste the right picture. But I studied at home very hard. My mother had a

big dictionary, she was translating for me, I tried to learn by heart – any possible way I could imagine.

The colloquial language came relatively quickly to her, by listening every day, and Zanda began understanding. The problem, though, was that she started overhearing how the schoolmates were talking behind her back, they called her ‘stinky’. Her school years turned out to be a hard experience. Although Zanda managed to pass all tests, and, according to her self-assessment, when she left Finland (after almost 4 years), she was fluent in conversational Finnish, her literary language and grammar were still not good enough.

Liene (25/9) moved during the last years of Soviet rule in Latvia, in the late 1980s. Her mother, a highly skilled professional, met her future husband from Finland. Her early migration experience resulted in distress at school, like Zanda’s experience, and panic attacks. While language skills came easier, Liene’s main need, in her narrative, was to survive bullying and exclusion:

I was scared that someone asks me something and I won’t know the answer. I avoided some public events. I needed to overcome my fear. I calculated in detail how I am going to get through it... I was scared I would be in a situation which there is no way out. I mourned that home felt so far away. I had this constant feeling that the whole school was chasing me and calling me names... of course the ‘Russian’, the ‘smelly’ one, this and that.

Being a migrant child cracked both Liene’s and Zanda’s ‘protective cocoons’ profoundly, and ‘smell’ is a powerful reference of being othered. Distinction through odour has been spread as a universal trait of an outer cultural othering through ethnicity, as well as within-culture divisions between classes, genders or generational groups (Classen 1993: 79–85; also Kim 2014: 56). Ascribing a smell to the *others* (such as, to immigrants who have moved to Finland from Latvia or Estonia) has been a publicly known approach during the late Soviet years as well as after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The narratives of such practices have been described in novels too (e.g. Oksanen 2003). The same narrative about the different smell of others has been circulated among ethnic Latvians about the Russian-speaking population living in the country throughout the same period. The ‘wrong’ odour, often categorised same as the wrong colour of skin (Kim 2014; Synnott 1993), is often seen as characteristic of immigrants who are labelled ‘foul-smelling foreigners’ (Classen 1993: 93).

On hindsight, Liene needed to reconcile with this othering experience through trying to understand her mother, who did not handle the situation in the best way to protect an immigrant child in the new environment. Her mother was a long-term unemployed woman, and it was also a time of economic crisis in Finland in the early 1990s. Trying to reconcile and understand her mother came only when Liene herself was a grown-up already:

If she would have been able to accept and overcome those difficulties, also my life would have been easier. She was a grown-up, with the capabilities of a grown-up, but she took mishaps very hard. But, well, you notice those things only later.

Thus, Liene now reflects that her mother could not accept the harsh reality she found after migrating to Finland and, therefore, deliberately ignored what was happening to Liene in the school. Liene points out that these kinds of experiences leave indelible marks in the making of the personhood of the child who has moved or is being moved along with her parent. In a similar vein, only as an adult could Liene critically reflect on her exclusion due to an immigrant status, while in childhood, she took it to a very personal level, as something is wrong with her as a human being.

The most prominent ruptures and well-being needs – becoming a migrant schoolchild and the consequent rupture of language – turned out to be largely informed by functional well-being, as Wright (2012) suggested. Two older participants, Liene and Zanda, went to school in Finland at a time when there was very little immigration. In Liene's case, her transitions were especially complex as she had started her first school years in Latvia when the country was still part of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, former Soviet citizens, especially from neighbouring Russia and Estonia, started arriving in Finland, which in the mid-1990s coincided with Finland's acceptance of humanitarian refugees from Somalia and other countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, Finland's immigration landscape was quite different from the current scenario, when 6.5% of the country's population is constituted by foreign-born immigrants (Statistics Finland 2018). Immigration was new to Finland, and the girls whom we interviewed suffered both a lack of structural support for language training and exclusion. However, as both, and especially Liene, articulated it later, as a child, she took any remark and exclusion as a sign that she is not liked and accepted as a person, not due to her migrant status or presumed ethnicity. Thus, we claim that through studying childhood migration stories, we can become more attentive to categories of ethnicity or nationality that can be too easily taken for granted in explaining migrant youth transitions (Mazzucato & Schans 2011).

Schooling: 'I actually liked it'

Alise (21/5.5) went to a Finnish school because she did not pass the entrance tests for an English school. Alise reflected on her memories about her first school years in Finland, that she took the so-called immigrants' class with a special emphasis on intensive teaching of the Finnish language. Alise reworked her first experiences with today's eyes: to her, childhood seems to be problem free. She did not think about how much she felt when she did not understand the language. Alise has learnt Finnish to such a level that nobody can say she is not a Finn now. Until the sixth grade, she was in the group for immigrants. After passing the language examinations, she was moved to a mainstream class, a decision that was made by the teachers, not her. Her childhood non-standard transition was from separation (as a migrant pupil) to a mainstream Finnish class, and her agency to decide whether she wants to be separated or not was constrained. While she was reflecting this placement as 'unfair', as she felt she did not need those extra Finnish lessons, to her, the experience in classes for immigrants forms a rather peculiarly empowering detail of her childhood in a special group for immigrants:

I was the youngest one. No one was on the first grade in that class. Others were older, up to sixth grade in that group. I remember I couldn't distinguish a child from a grown-up. It was confusing but actually I liked it! I didn't have particular problems there. (..) People now can't tell that I am not a Finn by the way I speak. Only by my name.

Jasmine (22/6) also mastered Finnish quite quickly. Jasmine's father was a Russian-speaking Latvian, but her parents were divorced and her dad stayed in Latvia. She remembered that, in the first years at school, her Russian skills came in handy for obtaining friends as there were many Russian-speaking kids in her school.

I wanted to go to school sooner, because all kids want to! I really liked it. There were many Russians. Since I could speak Russian very well, I contacted with Russians a lot. And then it was... I don't really remember why I stopped speaking Russian, but I think it was because [other school children] started calling me a Russian in school and that was... well, a Latvian can't bear that. So, I somehow stopped and didn't speak Russian anymore.

Eliza (18/8) did not remember properly the year in which she, or her mother, moved to Finland. After clarifying these issues with her mother who was at home during the time of the interview, Eliza states that she was 8 years old and soon turned 9 years old. Her mother got a job in an international finance corporation with an office located in Finland. She was separated from Eliza's dad already at that time and moved alone. The reason why Eliza remembers her arrival to Finland so vaguely might be that, in a period of around a year at the time they were moving, Eliza's mother moved to Russia too for a short time and then moved back to Finland for a more permanent position.

Eliza's memories are rather blurred compare to her mother's (who adds some facts to the interview). According to the mother, they spent a longer time in Russia, and Eliza was intermittently staying with her or with Eliza's grandmother in Latvia, in addition to going to the UK to study English because Eliza's mother was planning to send her daughter to the English-language school in Finland. Eliza's first memories about Finland are joy at the school system:

The major differences were at school. In Latvia and Russia, it seemed like the education system was pretty much the same, like the methods. In Finland what struck me most was that teachers were never shouting, they were kind. It surprised me that they wouldn't tower above you to explain something. They would sit down and try to be with you at the same level. So, I really liked the way, well that part of the education system and the way they treated the students.

For Jasmine and Alise, there were the so-called immigrant classes in place, as Finland rapidly became an immigration country during the 2000s. Such structures were helpful to functional well-being – fulfilling the function of language training well – so that both girls quickly acquired the language; being placed in a distinct group of immigrants of different

ages bothered Alise just slightly. It was important for her to fit in fully, hence her ambition to pass the language examinations and move to a 'mainstream' Finnish class. Having been socialised and educated fully through the Finnish system of schooling, both young women now consider themselves as belonging more to Finland, but feeling insecure about their encounters in Latvian and in Latvia. In the case of Eliza, she experienced an international schooling along with a lingering sense of not rooting in Finland, so that she could move again somewhere due to her mother's job. With her international diploma, she is able to move globally.

Temple (2010: 286–287), in her research among Polish migrants in the North of England, shows that learning a language is not merely an instrumental matter. The decisions that are made in learning language are also motivated by the work on one's identity and self-hood.

Our connections with languages are manifold and the factors that affect our language learning in multi-sited contexts can be both the social ones that stem from the acquisition of another cultural identity and new ways of expressing ourselves (Temple 2010: 287–288). While for Alise, it was fitting in to the extent that only her name signals a difference, for Jasmine, it was a fateful, unexplained recognition that she will be better off not speaking Russian as a reminder of her mixed background.

Relationships between language and identity can create 'culture's in-between', 'hybridity' and 'the third space' (Bhabha 1994; Wolf 2007). Often, as shown in the findings of Temple (2010), the shift in cultural and linguistic predisposition, as in our case from Latvia to Finland, which is followed by learning of a new language serves as a means of creating such 'third space'. For Eliza, it was literary – a functional third space of an international school. Learning English, not the local languages, has been documented also elsewhere among Russian-speaking populations from the former Soviet Union (Toomet 2011).

Towards well-being: youth transitions

Youth transitions of research participants revolve around more deliberate choices and the agency to pursue well-being goals in fulfilling relations. The multi-sitedness in terms of where and how these goals are pursued stem from childhood transitions.

Befriending mom, Latvians and a Finn

While Zanda recalls her school time without school friends, in the second year in Finland, she made friends with other, older Latvians in Finland, and specifically her own mother:

We were similar players with my mother, we both had to be very strong to survive as we knew clearly that we are here to earn money, we are here for a certain period of time [as long as the mother's work contract lasts].

[..]

There were very few Latvians in Helsinki at that time [late 1990s]. But when we met, those were the most eagerly anticipated events for me, playing the guitar and singing, saying what I had in my heart, watching Latvian films, and finally to speak Latvian. And there were two Latvian women, 12 and 15 years older than me. I suddenly entered into the adults' world. But the main thing was just to talk. My life felt very easy [compared to the previous year]. I knew that I will meet my [Latvian] friends, and all will be good. School was like a duty which had to be endured. The real life began after school [with Latvian friends.]

Years later, and being a professional adult, Zanda became friendly with a schoolmate from the Finnish school:

When I meet a former classmate, I feel different again... I was lower than grass back then in the Finnish school. We are in more similar positions now, we both look somewhat similar and it is interesting to catch up, how is he doing and how am I.

Falling in love

Liene's 'fateful moment' came rather late in her youth transition. A couple of years before the interview, she fell in love in Finland. She admits that, although her life has not necessarily become easier, she has changed the way she looks at her life and experiences:

I fell in love and it helped me to organise my thoughts and feelings. I realised I don't owe anything to anybody. I don't need to wait to be accepted by others. We can't expect anybody to pity us. We are on our own, and only we ourselves can pamper ourselves. ... It doesn't mean that you should fight with the whole world all the time. Slowly my life began when I started to pay more attention to myself. I started educating myself [psychologically] for my own sake and good. But I was still scared by that feeling that something bad will happen in the next step [...] Today I know I don't need to answer to anyone about my choices. I could say I feel lighter and clearer about my life now.

In sum, Liene's transition to full adulthood was achieved through reflection on the origins of her protective mechanisms, developed during schooling. After loving encounters, as an independent adult, she relaxed her self-imposed borders, which constrained her from friendly social relations in childhood and adolescence.

'Independently' in Latvia

Alise does not want to move back to Latvia. She feels she fully belongs to Finland, but she is mastering her 'Latvianness' due to her father who lives there and, now, as an adult, she

makes a conscious effort to connect with his new family and her stepbrothers and stepsisters. She wants to feel 'independent' while managing the unavoidable routines in Latvia:

In Latvia, it is very obviously felt that I am not a true Latvian, especially from my dad's side. When I was younger, they kept asking me, where do I want to live – in Latvia or Finland? Do I like living in Finland?

Alise reflects back to these questions and engages in a guesswork: she knows that certain and opposite responses are expected in Finland or Latvia. Latvian relatives expect her, as a child, who was born in Latvia, to confirm that she likes Latvia and would like to live there. However, since she has transited from school to higher education as fully integrated into the Finnish system and Finnish language, she realises that Latvian relatives have also noted this transition. Moreover, relatives are ethnically 'othering' her: she is not a fully Latvian child any more but a young adult with an accent:

If I say I am a Latvian, they ask: 'In what way are you Latvian?' And also, that was a traumatic experience, the first time in my life that I heard that I have an accent in Latvian. (..) Nobody ever told me before that I have an accent. And I still think about that a lot, [about the fact] that I am different. At the end of the day, I am Alise, myself. Yet, in Finland I feel more at home. Because in Latvia, all I hear are remarks that I am not from Latvia. (..) People are impatient, they speak fast. Their expectations towards my [Latvian language skills] are higher than I can give. They are surprised: why can't she speak well in Latvian? For this reason, it means to me a lot that I can move around in Latvia on my own, that I can buy a train ticket in Latvian, that I can be independent. I plan 100 years in advance what am I going to say [in official institutions]. But then when it's done, the feeling is great.

Independence, in her youth and geographical transitions to adulthood means to know and accept herself. Being a young adult also means to rely on her capabilities to manage unaccompanied movements around Latvia, regardless of how others perceive her.

Jasmine's mother and her stepfather have concrete plans of moving back to Latvia. They have almost finished building a family house there. Jasmine is looking forward to spending summers in Latvia with her son and her Finnish partner. She herself, however, does not consider moving back to Latvia permanently. She is equally concerned about her Latvian language skills, as, she believes that she is not fluent enough when speaking Latvian any more. Yet, summers in Latvia would be important to her as she wants to teach her son Latvian, but only her mother speaks to him fluent Latvian.

'Not worried about not fitting in'

Eliza developed a mechanism of not attaching herself to friends due to a constant feeling that they may move again due to her mother's job. Even during her stay in Finland, in less

than a year, she went back to a school in Latvia due to her mother's work. However, her Latvian language skills did not improve. Eliza is now fluent in English and Russian, as well as being able to speak Finnish to some extent and understand it to a fuller extent. She can understand Latvian when her half-brothers and -sisters from her father's second marriage speak, but she cannot maintain a conversation in this language. Moving to Latvia is not her choice and, instead, now that she has finished the international school in Finland (in the English language), she is considering moving away. She initially considered moving to Australia or some other English-speaking country, but now she wants to find a university programme that will help her to go to study and later live in Japan, as she is fascinated by the country and its culture. Since she is used to being on her own, she thinks she will not be so lonely moving there.

Well, one of my most concrete dreams is, well, finding a university programme that I can go to in Japan. At least for one exchange year, to live and to work there. I have been learning Japanese, for a couple of years... I would be happy to do almost anything if I could live in Japan. I am not worried about not fitting in. I am not scared if I go to Japan and don't fit in. I am used to that. That's normal, unless you go back to your own country... That would be my choice. I am kind of used to the fact I don't have so many friends.

Evans and Liu (2018) report cases when the new challenging language environment creates somewhat positive and exciting feelings in children, who are eager to learn the language faster and be able to communicate with their peers. At the same time, research shows that children – in their first years of arrival – tend to forge 'in-group memberships' with their schoolmates through a common language (Evans & Liu 2018: 160; Sime & Fox 2015a). We have found that, since there were very few Latvians in Helsinki in the 1990s, Zanda befriended her mother and older Latvians. Furthermore, now as an adult, Zanda revised and reworked her schooling experiences and became friendly with a former schoolmate – at a different time of her life and on a more equal footing psychologically. She is not a migrant anymore, her 'home' is Latvia now. She is a 'foreign' professional who travels to Finland due to international work reasons. Liene grew up without Latvian friends but reached her turning point through love (in Finland and with a Finnish partner). Being in love and loved urged her to reflect upon a time when she was not accepted and to rework it – through considering her protective behaviour towards her own children but still undermining her needs. In a much better situation were Eliza and Jasmine, both of whom could speak Russian and who were able to establish some friendships straightaway, though Jasmine stopped speaking Russian in school as explained earlier.

The literature on youth migration has also emphasised that the reflexive narration of one's own biography is often simultaneously embedded in local relations and interactions across borders, especially through extended families (Raffo & Reeves 2000). In terms of familial ruptures, the young women we interviewed reworked their relationships with parents, often in great depth. The mastering of a new language does not always guarantee acceptance in the local communities (cf. Temple 2010: 296, for the case of English proficiency

among Polish participants in the UK). Our research also shows that, as in the case of Alise, the multi-sited modes of acceptance or non-acceptance can extend not only to the country of arrival but also to the 'home' country, given the multi-sited nature of children's lives (Sime & Fox 2015b).

Conclusions

The precursors of current well-being can be and are often emplaced in the wider biographical context of earlier life stages, including events surrounding child migration. In this article, we have chosen to take a retrospective look at youth biographies and examine how childhood experiences feed into and are reworked towards better lives.

Methodologically, narrating the 'self' as a child going through ruptures helps to create and recognise migration experiences as ontologically cohesive (Jilani 2014). Such narrations offer a considerable time-space to reflect back and interpret childhood, adolescence and youth transitions from the current point of view. As the participants repeatedly emphasised, they have gone through internal dialogues about their childhood experiences many times in order to understand and make sense of what happened to them and how they strove for more fulfilling lives. Based on five long narrative interviews with young women who experienced migration to Finland as children, we flesh out the proposed notion of 'fateful well-being' with modes of pursuing a better life within constraints in childhood and during youth transitions.

Liene's falling in love is not purely her choice but her psychological effort on reconciling with her childhood's unloved child (herself), which is her conscious adult choice. Zanda's constrained choice to study language hard and from heart, as well as befriending older ethnic peers involved drawing on the few psychosocial resources she had in her constrained situation. Alise's respectful interpretation of how she is not accepted in her 'native' ethnolinguistic extended family comes from both her full integration in Finland through the education system and a choice not to move back to Latvia; and so is Jasmine's. Eliza's childhood, with a constant feeling that she could move again, leads to openness to move to a third place and is even more strengthened through her English language skills, while 'local' languages were lagging behind (cf. Toomet 2011).

Two final points need to be emphasised. Firstly, the reflective narrative approach helps our understanding of both children's and youth well-being as unfolding in personal histories. This is a critique to the prior overemphasis on choice and agency in child (e.g. Ni Laoire *et al.* 2011) or youth transitions (e.g. Cairns 2014). We argue that constrained agency better explains how migrant children can mobilise their capabilities, while not overlooking the hardships they go through when the 'protective cocoon' of taken-for-granted native languages and the non-migrant state of being does not protect them anymore. A narrative approach helps in unpacking well-established notions of 'ruptures' and 'becomings' (Hörschelmann 2011; King 2018; Worth 2009) in youth mobility in a novel way. By demonstrating the experiences of rupture and well-being side-by-side in the narrators'

own words, we have demonstrated how such rupture–well-being relations unfold in fateful moments.

Secondly, making sense of earlier mishaps and acting upon them with constrained agency are not only fateful moments. Wright (2012: 125–127) recognises that well-being is not a state of being that is accessible to all, but rather a goal to be pursued. Well-being, we claim, is not the ultimate ‘feeling well’ as a migrant. Fateful well-being is pursuing a deeply satisfying life within constraints, recognising what has led to a better life in the past and also reconciling with past and current difficulties. Methodologically, the narrative practice we have proposed is not a recipe for a good life per se; rather, it is an important well-being tool to reconcile with the childhood self, enabling an individual to accept and integrate earlier migration experiences into that young person’s life transitions.

Notes

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