

## MIGRANTS' INFORMAL LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY SPACE

### *The Experiences of People Migrating between Estonia and Finland*

#### Abstract

This study investigates informal learning processes and informal education in the transnational family space. Informal learning is examined through the theoretical lenses of situated learning that draws attention to how people learn through engaging regularly in shared, socially situated practices. The data consist of 98 interviews with people who have migrated from Estonia to Finland or who are transmigrating between these countries. While there is a large body of research on migrants' transnational activities in social, economic and political spheres, only a few studies have explored their border-crossing engagements from the learning perspective. The results show that families and kinship networks provide informal learning environments for mobile and non-mobile people. The key social learning processes in the transnational family space include constructing ethno-national identities through shared social practices, adopting sociocultural traditions and transnational brokering of conceptions and practices. Informal education is connected to passing cultural traditions and stimulating language learning of children.

#### Keywords

Informal learning • Immigration • Transnational space • Informal education • Migrant families

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## Introduction

Increasing transnational mobility of people, both temporary and permanent, is creating a dense and manifold transnational kinship network. Owing to the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), family members and relatives living in different countries can maintain contact even across long distances. Transnational connections shape the everyday lives of both migrants and their non-mobile significant others. In relation to transnational family relations and spaces, research has been presented on mothering across boundaries; the negotiation of diverse cultural, religious and linguistic identities; meanings of home and belonging; transnational care giving as well as the impact of cross-border economic exchanges and transnational lifestyles (e.g. Baldassar 2007; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Gouldbourne et al. 2010; Mohme 2014; Siim & Assmuth 2016; Zechner 2008). While there are a growing number of studies on transnational family environments and migrants' cross-border practices, they have seldom focused on the learning aspects. Moreover, studies examining the learning of migrants in general often relate to formal educational contexts in the host society (e.g. Rodríguez 2009), and there are only a few studies focusing on the informal learning of migrants in transnational settings (Alenius 2015; Cuban 2014; Sime & Pietka-Nykaza 2015).

The article examines what kinds of informal learning processes emerge and how informal education takes place in the transnational family space based on the qualitative study of 78 semi-structured and 20 life-course interviews with adult migrants who had migrated from Estonia to Finland or who had been transmigrating between these two countries. In general, *informal learning* denotes unorganised learning taking place in different spheres of life, for example, in families or at workplaces, in contrast to formal learning that refers to learning occurring in formal education, which is based on a curriculum and often leads to a qualification (Hager & Halliday 2009; Webb 2015). *Informal education* refers to intentional activities outside formal education that aim to promote learning, for example, when immigrant parents stimulate language learning of their children through different kinds of activities (Becker, Boldin & Klein 2016). Informal learning is here examined through the theoretical lenses of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), which highlight the ways in which people learn through engaging regularly in various social communities and groups throughout their life course. Through this engagement, individuals can gradually adopt new ideas, learn new skills and simultaneously construct their identities.

Transnational family space is understood here as a socially constructed space based on people's border-crossing kinship ties and practices (Alenius 2015). Drawing on the framework of Faist

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(2000) for transnational social spaces, the transnational family space is divided into macro, meso and micro levels. Macro-level factors, such as the national policies and sociocultural and economic development of societies, shape social practices in this space. The meso level consists of families and transnational kinship networks. In this research, the focus is on the micro level: specifically on the informal learning of individuals and also on the practices of informal education in transnational settings. In addition, on the meso level, the study examines families and transnational kinship networks as informal learning environments.

It has been argued that in the 1990s, a 'transnational turn' took place in migration research (Faist 2004). Since then numerous studies have investigated migrants' transnational ties, cross-border collaboration and social formations connecting both migrants and non-migrants. In particular, research has been presented on transnational mobilities of people, capital and items, while less attention has been paid to the cross-border flows of ideas (Faist, Fauser & Reisenauer 2013). Levitt (2001), for example, has investigated *social remittances*, i.e. conceptions and practices transferred by migrants to non-migrants residing in the countries of emigration. Transnational visits and cross-border interaction between migrants and non-migrants provide opportunities for transmitting new ideas, behaviours and identities (Levitt 2001). However, it is argued here that ideas are not transferred across national borders in the same manner as financial and material remittances but instead such processes are connected to individual and social learning processes (see also Alenius 2015). In migration studies, such learning processes have seldom been scrutinized. In this regard, the article contributes to an exploration of informal learning processes in transnational family environments.

In relation to transnational families, Cuban (2014) scrutinized the nature of mobile learning in such families. Through the daily use of ICTs, these migrants created learning spaces that enabled them to share know-how needed in their transnational lives. Concerning migrant families, Sandu (2013) showed how everyday practices, such as cooking and gardening, provided opportunities for informal learning. Both these studies connected informal learning to the engagement in shared, social practices. Yet the scope of informal learning was rather narrow in these studies: Cuban (2014) focused on the use of ICT as a mediation tool and Sandu (2013) scrutinised particularly the nature of migrants' homemaking practices. Concerning informal education in immigrant families, it was examined how parents' informal learning supported the schooling of their children (Guo 2011) and how informal education fostered the children's acquisition of host country's language (Becker, Boldin & Klein 2016). Moreover, Sime and Pietka-Nykaza (2015) explored intergenerational learning in migrant families focusing on cultural transmission and acculturation processes. This article extends the recent discussion of migrants' informal learning and education and provides a new theoretical perspective to analyse these processes in the transnational family space by combining the situated learning theory and transnational optic in the analysis.

In the following sections, I had briefly described the development of cross-border mobilities in the Estonia–Finland space, introduced the core ideas of the situated learning theory, and explained the process of data collection and analysis. Next, I had presented the main results of the study and illustrated them using interview extracts. The findings of this study show that informal education in the transnational family space focused particularly on the activities supporting the maintenance of native languages and learning sociocultural traditions, and in relation to informal learning, the family members adopted cultural practices and constructed their ethno-national identities through engaging in everyday activities of

the families. Transnational communication and visits enabled the informants and their significant others to engage in transnational brokering sharing ideas and practices across national borders, although societal development and internal tensions affected and, to some extent, complicated transnational learning processes. In the end, I had discussed theoretical contributions of the study in relation to the findings of other studies in the field and suggested some topics for further research.

## Cross-border mobility in Estonia–Finland space

There is a long history of mutual collaboration between Finns and Estonians. The geographical proximity has supported cross-border interaction and mobilities in both directions. The common linguistic roots and historical developments, such as being under foreign domination for several centuries, have fostered feelings of affinity between the two nations. Finland became independent in 1917, and Estonia became independent in 1918. The migration between these countries was strictly monitored and fairly limited particularly during the Soviet occupation of Estonia (1944–1991) (Jakobson et al. 2012; Jakobson, Kalev & Ruutsoo 2012). This transnational space has rapidly transformed in recent decades. Both Finland and Estonia now belong to the European Union and to the Schengen Area, enabling free movement of individuals. Legislation and administrative regulations no longer restrict cross-border mobility between these countries.

The number of people migrating between the two countries has increased particularly since the mid-2000s. Although the majority of people have moved from Estonia to Finland, there have also been people migrating in the opposite direction. In Finland, there have been both temporary migrants from Estonia, including blue-collar workers on secondment and transmigrants, and more permanent immigrants, such as people of Ingrian Finnish origin, students, labour migrants, and those moving for family reasons (Jakobson et al. 2012). Among foreign residents, Estonians form the largest group in Finland with approximately 50,300 people in 2015 (equal numbers of males and females), accounting for 0.9% of the total population (Finnish Immigration Service 2016). There are no comprehensive records on the number or gender of transmigrants. A study based on the user data of mobile phones showed that there were approximately 35,000 Estonians who frequently commuted between the two countries (Ahas 2012).

## Situated learning theory

The sociocultural, situated learning perspective highlights how people learn not only in formal education but also more broadly in their everyday lives through participating in the activities of different social groups. This theoretical perspective underlines socially embedded nature of learning in a specific learning environment (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998, 2010). For example, in families, children learn the ways of interaction through observing and participating in everyday conversations and activities between family members. However, the rules of interaction may not be similar in other social groups in which they engage later during their life course, such as peer groups or work communities. Therefore, individuals internalise ways of interaction in a particular group through regular engagement in the group's social practices. The situated learning theory belongs to broader sociocultural learning approach, which highlights that

social interaction is mediated through various linguistic 'tools', such as concepts and theories, and physical *artefacts*, for example, equipment and programmes (Wenger 1998; Wertsch, del Río & Alvarez 1995).

The *communities of practice* (CoP) concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and refined by Wenger (1998, 2010) draws attention to how people learn through engaging regularly in shared, socially situated practices. According to Wenger (1998), CoPs are characterised by 1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise and 3) a shared repertoire. *Mutual engagement* in shared practices defines and unites a community. Concerning families, this can involve their everyday activities and forms of collaboration. *Joint enterprise* refers to collective processes of negotiation: communities' practices and goals are defined through the processes of pursuing them. A *shared repertoire* includes, for example, stories, tools and concepts that have been created or adopted by the family members. The CoP concept has been applied particularly to professional communities, although the perspective would also be appropriate for scrutinizing all kinds of social groups. While research on the CoPs has often focused on locally situated communities, Cuban (2014) showed how ICT-based communication enables the formation of transnational CoPs connecting migrants and their family members abroad.

Lave and Wenger (1991) explored the learning cycle within communities through the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*: newcomers gradually move toward full participation by observing the practices of more experienced members. Yet the one-way learning process, underlining the transmission of social practices from experts to newcomers, does not cover the ways in which newcomers' expertise and roles in different communities are shaped by their previous learning trajectories (see e.g. Fuller 2007). In the case of families, 'newcomers' could refer to individuals who through partnership or marriage join new kinship communities. Small children could also be described as 'newcomers' who gradually learn and partly internalize the beliefs and practices of their families. Yet teenagers and also adults may reject some of the beliefs they have adopted in their families and often require ideas from other communities they engage in, such as peer groups and professional communities (Alenius 2015).

The situated learning approach focuses on individuals' participation in social practice through their membership of various social groups. The construction of identities is seen as an integral part of social learning (Wenger 2010). The systems of social relations in communities shape individuals and their opportunities for personal development (Lave & Wenger 1991). Identity can be understood both as a negotiated experience of self and as a *learning trajectory*, which is constantly reformed through participation in various communities (Wenger 1998). Different types of *learning trajectories* in relation to individuals' engagement within CoPs have been identified by Wenger (1998). For example, peripheral trajectories provide limited access to a community and thus only restricted opportunities for learning, whereas insider trajectories concern full members who can fully take part in the group's activities and have more possibilities to adopt new ideas and practices.

People's multi-membership of several communities through their life course provides opportunities for accessing new ideas and ways of doing as well as sharing them with others. Individuals may forge links between different communities and convey ideas and practices from one community to another. *Brokering* (Wenger 1998) refers to the liaisons created by individuals between different social groups. It requires translation and coordination between different perspectives. During translation processes, conceptions and practices may be

reinterpreted and modified. Social practices can be mediated not only through interaction but also through artefacts. *Boundary encounters* (Wenger 1998) are events that provide connections between communities. In this study, it is examined how the informants acted as transnational brokers by conveying ideas, for example, from one family to another across national borders. Although Wenger has not specifically examined cross-border learning processes, in this study, these concepts are applied to examine informal learning in the transnational family space.

## Methodology

The data of this study consist of 98 interviews conducted in Finland during the Transnationalisation, Migration and Transformation: Multi-level Analysis of Migrant Transnationalism (TRANS-NET) research project.<sup>1</sup> The project examined adult migrants' transnational practices in four binational spaces: Estonia–Finland, India–UK, Morocco–France and Turkey–Germany. The data include 78 semi-structured and 20 life-course interviews with adults who had migrated from Estonia to Finland (a few had first resided in another foreign country before moving to Finland) or who had been transmigrating between these two countries. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted for 1 hour on average. The Trans-Net project explored the dynamics of people's transnational practices and how these were connected to wider processes of political, economic, sociocultural and educational transformations underway (Pitkänen, İçduygu & Sert 2012). This study focused on the informal learning and education in transnational family environments. Consequently, only some parts of the interview data were relevant for the scope of this research. In the semi-structured interviews, the informants were asked to describe their cross-border contacts and the meaning of transnational activities in their everyday lives. They were moreover asked to provide examples of their learning experiences and ways of sharing ideas, skills or practices with others. In the life-course interviews, the informants were asked to explain more about their transnational activities, migratory paths and family lives.

The interviewees included labour migrants, people migrating due to family reasons, foreign degree students and the so-called Ingrian Finns who were allowed to immigrate to Finland on the grounds of their ethnic origin. Yet one should note that the informants' reasons for migration were often mixed and related to other aspects, such as feelings of insecurity, adventure seeking and difficulties in pair relationships. The informants were selected mostly through snowball sampling and with the assistance of migrants' associations and educational institutions. The aim of this study was to gather a variety of respondents, particularly people with diverse transnational activities and also those with migratory backgrounds and educational qualifications and representing different ethnic, linguistic groups and religious denominations. The informants included 30 males and 50 females aged 19–64 years at the time of the interviews. Almost all informants (except three) were adults when they migrated to Finland or started transmigration between Estonia and Finland. The native languages of the respondents were Estonian, Russian and Finnish. The informants' families included both monolingual (Estonian/Russian) and bilingual families (both Finnish–Estonian and Russian–Finnish). In this article, all the names of the informants are fictional, and details that could reveal the identity of the interviewees have been removed.

The interview data were analysed qualitatively, with a combination of data-based and theory-guided content analysis (Krippendorff 2013;

Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009). At the early stages of the analysis process, the full data set was first analysed taking a data-based approach, organising the data into preliminary categories. This involved examining what the informants reported having learnt in relation to their family lives, the accounts of sharing ideas or practices with others and how they described their everyday practices related to families and kinship networks. At the later stages of analysis, theory-guided content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009) was applied: theoretical concepts, such as CoPs, brokering and boundary encounters, assisted in theoretically conceptualising the phenomena examined. In general, informal learning and education in transnational family environments were examined from the perspectives of situated learning theory. The aim was not to test the theory but rather to enhance the analysis with the assistance of the chosen theoretical concepts.

### Language learning, construction of identity and adoption of cultural practices in families in transnational settings

The situated learning perspective portrays identity construction as a key element in social learning (Wenger 1998). In the interview accounts of the informants, national identity and language were often interwoven and discussed in relation to families. In their everyday lives, the informants aimed to pass on their cultural and linguistic heritage to their offspring. The informants stressed the importance of informal education in their native languages. In addition to frequent transnational communication through social media and by phone, visits to Estonia and Russia (for Russian speakers) were deemed important for both language and cultural learning and maintaining ties to the country of origin and to significant others. The grandparents had also supported the language and sociocultural learning of their grandchildren through caring for them in both Estonia and Finland. In the following interview extract, Marina draws attention to the importance of informal education of Estonian language and the ways in which informal learning of the language is fostered through *linguistic and physical artefacts* (Wenger 1998; Wertsch, del Río & Alvarez 1995). Moreover, while grandmother is providing transnational care, she is also sharing narratives with her relatives related to the historical events of Estonia. Such stories not only support informal linguistic and cultural learning but can also become a *shared repertoire* (Wenger 1998) of the family when repeated by other family members. In another interview account, Toomas underlines the importance of language for ethnic/national identity and highlights how grandparents can support informal language learning and foster grandchild's ethnic identity construction through everyday usage of the Estonian language.

Interviewer (I): You said that you would like to convey or tell your children about your own roots. So, how would you like to teach or tell about these? Respondent (R): Well, first of all, we have this language, we speak only Estonian at home and nothing else, no Finnish at home, not at all. And then we have these Estonian books all around the house and also movies and DVDs for the children. It comes a lot through language that if we say something or there is a phrase and then a child asks what it means and through that one can tell them about things. And, in fact, my granny [from Estonia] is now here [in Finland] to help to look after the children and, of course, she tells these stories how it was during the war and such (Marina, female, 30–39 years old).

We speak Estonian at home, and, as I said, I listen to radio and telly [the informant has previously explained that he followed the Estonian media] and those things actually became quite important when my daughter's son was born. Her husband is namely Finnish, so we agreed that the son would become bilingual and that his mother will talk to him in Estonian and his father in Finnish and that he will go to a Finnish kindergarten and school and I, grandpa, will become the supporter of his Estonian language. The mother tongue is very important, very important indeed because one's own identity is a part of it, that's the key issue (Toomas, male, 50–59 years old).

Russian-speaking informants also highlighted the importance of maintaining their native language and fostering national identities through informal education in Russian at home. In addition to engagement in Russian clubs in Finland, visits both to Estonia (meeting Russian-speaking relatives) and to Russia provided opportunities to support language learning and enculturation into Russian-speaking communities. Several Estonian and Russian-speaking informants stressed their intentional activities that aimed to support their children's learning of native language. This was often described as their duty, also in the cases when they had failed to do so. Because of long holiday periods (particularly school holidays), families and/or children were often able to spend extended periods in the country of origin (see also Siim and Assmuth 2016) that enabled them to observe and learn everyday practices of the local communities. The following extract highlights that although informal education of native language is challenging without the support of surrounding linguistic community, transnational visits can support children's informal learning of both native language and local practices.

I do speak Russian to my children but often they reply to me in Finnish because they are more fluent in it, maybe they don't want to [speak Russian] because it is more difficult because they know fewer words in Russian and then they don't want to speak it because they say that there are no Russians here so why should we speak it, but when they go to Estonia then then they try to understand that others don't understand [Finnish] so then they speak [Russian] and they see what children do there and how they play (Natalia, female, 30–39 years old).

The educational background of the parents seemed to have influenced the informal education of languages: informants with a higher education background stressed the importance of using only the mother tongue when communicating with family members, whereas those with lower educational qualifications highlighted more the importance of learning Finnish and adjusting to the Finnish society (see also Liebkind et al. 2004). In bilingual families, family members had been negotiating the rules of communication and informal education of languages at home. In some cases, the result of joint enterprise (Wenger 1998) had been the declining usage of Estonian language in these families.

When the informants contemplated their own ethno-national identities, those respondents with an Estonian spouse often explained that they had maintained a firm Estonian or Russian identity. These included both more permanent settlers and transmigrants commuting between the two countries. However, those who had a Finnish partner or spouse often reported how their identity had gradually been shifting from an Estonian/Russian identity to a bicultural identity. The process had been slow and had involved adopting Finnish beliefs, practices and mindsets. In the following extract, Helda, who had married a

Finn, explains that she had assumed a bicultural identity. Helda's case exemplifies that engagement in everyday practices can shape individuals' ethno-national identity construction and mindset although these gradual and often tacit informal learning processes can be difficult to verbalise and analyse in detail (see also Cuban 2014).

In some things I feel, for example, when I discuss something with my sister or with my mum [living in Estonia] I feel and I notice that I think like the Finns, this everyday life has transformed me/.../I cannot say absolutely that I'm Finnish and I can't anymore say I'm Estonian but it's a bit of both (Helda, female, 40–49 years old).

However, one should bear in mind that families are not the only social units affecting the identity development of individuals. The situated learning perspective (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) highlights how people's multi-membership of different social groups throughout their lives contributes to their lifelong learning processes. While this article focuses on families and transnational kinship networks, the engagement in work communities and in various associations also contributed to the informants' ongoing identity construction (Alenius 2015).

In relation to informal education of their sociocultural traditions, the respondents were reflecting their own roots and the meaning of such traditions. The informants wanted to pass on various values, attitudes and everyday traditions to their children, which they connected to 'the Estonian/Russian/Ingrian Finnish way of life' or 'bonds to Estonia'. The informants did not have a unified understanding on 'the Estonian/Russian/Ingrian-Finnish culture' but instead gave various examples on different issues that they connected to their traditions or culture. In the following extracts, Ene is associating Estonian traditions to everyday practices, such as using natural remedies and providing certain dishes, while Rando is discussing issues related to political culture, ways of behaviour and other cultural manifestations. These accounts draw attention to how sociocultural practices and traditions are *mediated through artefacts* (Wenger 1998; Wertsch, del Río & Alvarez 1995), such as natural medicines and literature.

R: to pass on that culture to the children or also those old traditions because there are such issues, somehow such old traditions in Estonia which do not exist in Finland, and I hope that our children could feel and know those. I: Yes, what kinds of? Could you give some examples? R: Probably food culture, and then these customs which relate to nature/.../when my kids fall ill before I give them any medicine, I try those granny's ointments and I've prepared natural medicines and such from nature myself. And then our kids are used to it that we don't eat [laughs] buy much from the chemists (Ene, female, 40–49 years old).

I: How would you like to pass on this Estonian culture to your children? R: Well, if you think of these practical things, it's through literature, music and other things and, in a way, I'd like to show Estonian perseverance and also pass on skills how to cope with difficulties to the next generation. If you look at Estonia's history through the centuries, almost millennia, it has been always surviving under foreign rule, and still the Estonian nation has survived. I'd like to highlight those abilities, adaptability and being dynamic which I think are typical for Estonians (Rando, male, 30–39 years old).

Yet some respondents discussed that, in their view, many Estonian traditions had been 'lost' during the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

Certain traditions had not been allowed to perform during the Soviet era. Therefore, it was problematic to define or revive traditions and convey them to offspring through informal education.

## Transnational brokering in transnational family space

Diverse forms of cross-border communication and contacts, both online and face-to-face, enabled the informants to share ideas, information and practices with non-migrants residing in another country. Daily communication between migrants and their significant others often concerned everyday matters but discussions were also connected to societal issues. The informants and their non-migrant family members residing in another society compared their experiences in various communities in different societal settings. The encounters between mobile and non-mobile individuals offered opportunities for *boundary encounters* (Wenger 1998: 112–113) in which new ideas and practices were shared with members of different social communities. The interviewees had been discussing, for example, differences between Finnish and Estonian behaviours with their family members living in Estonia and in other countries (e.g. Ukraine and Russia). The informants rarely directly transferred ideas or identities across borders, as suggested by Levitt (2001), but rather compared and debated different views and ways of behavior with their family members. Social learning in transnational settings was therefore a gradual process that involved also modification of ideas and practices.

Transnational communication and visits offered opportunities for the migrants and for their non-migrant family members to convey practices across national borders. Transnational brokering (cf. *brokering*, Wenger 1998) had involved introducing cultural practices and tools used in one community to the members of another community located in a different nation-state. The informants had performed, for example, the Finnish Easter tradition, called *virpominen* in Finnish, for their Estonian relatives. In this hybrid tradition, which combines elements from both Orthodox religion and non-religious rituals, children dress up as witches and bring decorated branches to their neighbours and friends and simultaneously recite certain rhymes. Moreover, the informants had been introducing and mixing elements of different Christmas traditions when celebrating this festival with their relatives in both Finland and Estonia. The following example draws attention to the role of *artefacts* (Wenger 1998; Wertsch, del Río & Alvarez 1995) in transnational brokering. In transnational settings, artefacts can convey cultural practices from one country to another although the new recipients may also adapt these practices to fit into the new context.

For example, people on that side [in Estonia] have been really interested in this *virpominen* here!.../ There have been those traditions of their own and cultural things there, and it's so interesting that when Estonians go there, they do these *virpomisoksat* [decorated Easter twigs] taking a piece of culture there!.../when they have brought Easter eggs from one house to the next [in Estonia] and then Christmas ham that hasn't been eaten in Estonia but when Estonians [from Finland] go back home for Christmas, they take a ham with them. And people there are starting to observe this[tradition], really enthusiastically they are baking ham for Christmas (Liis, female, 40–49 years old).

While research on social remittances (e.g. Levitt 2001) has often stressed that cultural remittances are flowing particularly from host

societies to the countries of emigration, the following interview extract shows how transnational brokering (cf. Wenger 1998) can occur also the other way, from the 'sendion region' to the host society.

We usually spent Christmas at the home of my step-father's parents [in Finland] and there were actually no other children then, and we always sang to them because there is a tradition in Estonia that one has to perform a song or recite a poem for each gift, and they didn't have this [tradition] so we perhaps introduced it. Otherwise, those Christmas meals were rather different here compared to [those which we had in Estonia] there, so my mother sometimes brought blood sausage from Estonia which [people also eat] here in X [a town in Finland] but which people didn't eat on our island [in Finland] (Romi, male, 20–29 years old).

The families of the informants exemplified various features of CoPs as defined by Wenger (1998). Mutual engagement (Wenger 1998) included all their shared activities, such as engaging in frequent conversations, performing daily rituals, caring for each other and creating unity through everyday activities. The shared practices provided opportunities to recreate and 'finetune' artefacts and combine elements from various groups across national and cultural borders. Families' *shared repertoires* (Wenger 1998) consisted of their ways of celebrating festivals, stories of family histories, shared ways of informal education and diverse cultural artefacts. A joint enterprise (Wenger 1998) involved collective processes of negotiation concerning families' shared practices and goals. The informants negotiated with their family members, for example, in the ways in which different traditions were maintained and modified. Some of the families had also been negotiating the terms of their political membership of these two societies: whether the family members would apply for Finnish citizenship or keep their Estonian citizenship. While many informants stressed their willingness to maintain their Estonian citizenship as a symbol of their Estonian roots, some of the informants reported that obtaining Finnish citizenship could be an indication of also having a Finnish dimension in their identity.

## Tensions and fractions in transnational learning spaces

Transnational family space is not necessarily equal or conflict-free learning environment. Transnational kinship networks may be sources of exploitation and internally fractured by relations of gender and generations (Qureshi *et al.* 2012). In this research, some of the informants explained how the differences in gender orders had caused disputes between family members. The following account shows how being exposed to different conceptions in two societies had enabled the informant to identify and learn differences in gender orders and how the different conceptions of gender roles had created tensions in transnational family environments.

The traditional Estonian way of thinking is that a woman's place is in the kitchen, and I'm astonished at these things, I don't know to what extent I would have wondered at these if I'd lived in Estonia. For example, my mother meets my brother's new girlfriend, and then she tells me that she's so nice and can do everything, so I ask, mum, what do you mean by everything, and I knew that she meant like cooking and taking care of the home but I'm astonished how one can say such things. On the other hand, I feel that my Finnish relatives here in Finland think that I

should be like that but I just don't have that attitude that women should stay in the kitchen, I just don't have it. And there have been conflicts because of this (Sirje, female, 30–39 years old).

Concerning informal education in migrant families, bringing up children in transnational settings may entail negotiations between different cultural traditions. Family members may be imposed to different, sometimes, conflicting belief systems that involve processes of reorganisation and adjustments (Harrami & Mouna 2010). The second generation does not necessarily adopt their parents' transnational practices or lifestyles but instead reinterpret these in relation to their evolving social ties both locally and across borders (Haikkola 2011). Concerning the Estonia–Finland space, a study by Hyvönen (2009) showed how tensions could arise between migrants and their relatives in relation to methods of child rearing, for example, in relation to corporal punishment. The respondents of this study did not directly report such conflicts, although in families there had been negotiations on the languages to be used in internal communication and the ways of celebrating different festivals.

CoPs are not necessarily harmonious learning environments but instead are affected by unequal power relations within these environments (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). The inequalities may also be embedded in transnational family environments although these matters might not be directly reported in research interviews. The following provocative account of an informant, here called Indrek, suggests that power differentials and socioeconomic differences between the two societies may be portrayed at the level of local communities and affect how relatives position newcomers of these communities. Such power differentials can affect the learning trajectories and identity construction of individuals engaging in these communities (cf. Wenger 1998).

Well, to be honest, if a Finnish son takes a wife from Estonia then family members, parents, and neighbours [in Finland] think that because our son could not get a Finnish woman, then he brought one from Estonia because you can get one cheaper there, you can make an impression with a Toyota Corolla there which you cannot do in Finland. But, of course, you don't ever say such things aloud (Indrek, male, 30–39 years old).

There were a few informants who contemplated how living in different societies had created divisions and tensions between family members. Despite the opportunity for frequent visits in both directions and for engaging in transnational communication, thanks to ICT, one cannot live simultaneously in two societies. Macro-level political and socio-cultural development and struggles shape local communities and social relations (Anthias 2012: 102,107; Holland & Lave 2009), and these factors can complicate both informal learning and education. In the following account, Maarja, residing in Finland for >25 years, reflects how societal development in these two countries has created division between family members, affecting abilities to understand different perspectives and share conceptions.

While the life worlds of significant others [in Estonia] has become alien to me, this applies also more broadly to Estonian society. I have been here, away from there, so I no longer understand or accept all their beliefs or the changes they have made there. Unfortunately, we do live in different times and in different worlds, them there and us here. They think that time has passed really fast while my husband and I, we think that the time has passed slowly and almost stopped when we moved to Finland/.../for

them we are even frightening because we think in a completely different way than they do (Maarja, female, 40–49 years old).

To conclude, when analysing transnational learning environments, one needs to take into account the ways in which broader societal developments affect local communities and how tensions can arise due to unequal power relations affecting the positions and learning trajectories of individuals engaging in the communities.

## Conclusion

In this study, it was examined what kinds of informal learning processes emerge and how informal education takes place in the transnational family space. The engagement in shared, social practices, such as transnational and face-to-face communication, celebrating festivals and caring for significant others, enabled individuals in the transnational family space to learn informally. The key informal learning processes in the transnational family space included constructing ethno-national identities, adopting sociocultural traditions and transnational brokering in which ideas and practices were conveyed across national borders, often mediated through linguistic and physical artefacts. Informal education was connected to activities supporting the learning of native language and sociocultural traditions. Macro-level, societal and cultural developments shaped social practices and informal learning opportunities at local communities; internal tensions and power relations affected individuals engaging in these learning environments.

This study examined informal education and learning processes in transnational settings by applying concepts and perspectives from the situated learning theory and transnational migration research. These two theoretical perspectives have so far rarely been combined (for a few exceptions, see Alenius 2015; Cuban 2014). These studies shed light on the everyday learning processes taking place both locally and across borders in transnational families and kinship networks. Combining these two theoretical perspectives makes it possible to examine informal learning environments that are not limited within the borders of a single nation-state. Furthermore, studies applying situated learning perspectives to examine transnational and multicultural environments aim to move away from the culturalist approach, which portrays individuals as representatives of their respective cultures, presents cultures as predetermining the behaviour of people and relies on an essentialist understanding of cultures (Alenius 2015; Zoletto 2015). Instead of focusing on 'encounters between different cultures', these studies draw attention to the ways in which individuals' engagement in various local communities and interaction between different groups provide opportunities for sociocultural learning.

Research has drawn attention to the role of cross-border communication and shared practices, such as narrating family histories, in creating unity and reproducing families in a transnational setting (Schmidt 2011; Siim 2013; Tiaynen 2013). Identities and the ways of belonging in relation to social ties and specific places are also negotiated and reconstructed through shared stories and discussions between migrants and their significant others across borders (Haikkola 2011; Siim 2013). In this study, these processes were connected to the situated learning framework. Shared

practices foster the mutual engagement (Wenger 1998) of learning communities. Communities are also recreated through collective processes of negotiation. Furthermore, shared repertoires (Wenger 1998), such as various artefacts and cultural traditions, are also an essential feature of CoPs. Consequently, many of the transnational practices of migrants and their families can be conceptualized as forms of situated learning and ongoing formation of informal learning communities.

In this study, the interview accounts provided examples of forms of informal education and learning in transnational family environments from the adults' perspectives. Sime and Pietka-Nykaza (2015) examined migrant children's informal learning and highlighted the children's agency in transnational, intergenerational learning. In their study, children had been portrayed as the experts of host country's language and sociocultural practices challenging parents' traditional role as 'funds of knowledge' (Sime & Pietka-Nykaza 2015: 215). Consequently, in these families, children were not positioned solely as 'newcomers' of their CoPs who only learn from more experienced members (cf. Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) but had also a more active role as *brokers* (Wenger 1998), both locally and across national borders (when communicating with their grandparents residing in the country of origin). The study of Siim and Assmuth (2016) drew attention to the ways in which children's accounts of adjusting to a new cultural environment and living transnationally significantly differed from their parents' accounts. Therefore, one could in the future compare the informal learning experiences of different generations in transnational settings.

This study examined the processes of informal learning and education in transnational environments focusing on migrants in the Estonia–Finland space, which has its unique features affecting transnational contacts and practices. For example, making transnational visits to the country of origin is relatively easy due to the short distance, frequent transport connections and supportive administrative and legislative structures. Therefore, compared to the study by Mohme (2014) on the transnational practices of young Somali-Swedes, the second generation of migrants in the Estonia–Finland space has opportunities to make frequent visits to their parents' home society and may closely follow developments in their country of origin. As evolving macro-level factors, such as the political and sociocultural development of societies, shape social relations in local communities (Anthias 2012; Holland & Lave 2009) and informal learning processes in transnational settings, one could also analyse and compare informal learning in different kinds of transnational spaces.

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