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National identity, collective events and meaning: A qualitative study of adolescents'
autobiographical narratives of flag ceremonies in Finland

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Abstract

Although collective events are central to group identity processes, little is known about how young people experience and remember national ceremonies in which they have participated. This qualitative study analyses 80 autobiographical narratives written by upper-secondary-school students about flag ceremonies from their past in Finland. The analysis reveals that the narratives fall into three categories (*(Dis)honoured*, *Deserved* and *Loved Flag*) according to how the social context, participants' actions, narrator's role and emotions are described, all of which combine to create a dense web of meanings associated with this common national ceremony. The results also indicate that different group contexts – family and peer group networks, and the national context – are inextricably linked in the narratives, and that the meanings associated with these contexts tend to fuse. The findings highlight the importance of analysing national collective events and related autobiographical memories to better understand the sources of national identity's emotional power.

Keywords: Collective events; national rituals; national identity; national symbols; meaning; qualitative research

Introduction

Although sociopsychological research has not focused on the role of autobiographical memories in the construction of collective identities, it is clear that they are closely linked. First, autobiographical memories on cultural practices (e.g. listening to music), collective actions (e.g. joining a demonstration) or historical events (e.g. presidential elections) can constitute shared world views and experiences of common faith (Pennebaker, Paez & Rim, 1997; Schuman & Scott, 1989; van Dijck, 2006). Second, group-related autobiographical memories may give emotionally significant meanings to social categories, situate communities in experienced spaces, and provide them with a sense of belonging and being; these autobiographical memories can construct collective identities from 'inside' (Berenskoetter, 2014). Finally, such autobiographical memories can evolve into collective narratives which can be passed on to future generations as myths (Bell, 2003) or social representations (Liu & Hilton, 2005) and in this way they can secure the continuity of meaningful collective identities.

Since autobiographical memories play such an important role in the construction of collective identities, people with access to power try to create and control such memories (Bell, 2003; Connerton, 1989). Collective events that are routinely repeated in everyday life play an especially central role in this struggle for people's hearts and souls (Connerton, 1989); through them communities can create ties between the body-mind and relevant social categories. Previous research demonstrates that collective events allow participants to construct and express group identities (Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2007; O'Donnell, et al., 2016). They create experiences that enable people to feel connected with others, to be recognised as valued group members, to receive validation of their beliefs and emotional experiences, and to feel empowered (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Neville & Reicher, 2011). Furthermore, in collective events the social category associated with the group is given embodied, experienced form (e.g. Barsalou, Barbey, Simmons & Santos, 2005) and so these events are able to reproduce existing, often non-verbal, meanings and transmit them to younger generations

(Connerton, 1989). Finally, the repetitive nature of these events produces shared, embodied habits which locate children and adolescents in stable social networks (Edensor, 2006) and ensure the embodied continuity of the collective's most important values and norms across generations (Connerton, 1989).

This study aims to increase the current understanding of national meaning-making and how national identities are constructed by analysing autobiographical memories of one routinely repeated collective event in nation-states: flag-raising and related rituals (e.g. flag processions), which I refer to here as 'flag ceremonies'. The study qualitatively and inductively analyses the kinds of autobiographical memory of flag ceremonies that Finnish adolescents report, and how meaning is constructed in such memories in Finland. The purpose of studying autobiographical memories of these events is to help us to better understand how typical features of small groups, such as intimacy, become associated with a nation as a social category, and why national groups inspire loyalties that can be stronger even than those associated with close networks such as families. Analysing the interaction between the private and the collective is central to understanding the dynamics of nationalism and national identities (Bell, 2003). Although there is already a large literature on meanings, practices and attitudes associated with national flags (e.g. Becker et al., 2017; Ferguson & Hassin, 2007), to the best of my knowledge this is the first study of autobiographical memories of a national flag and associated ceremonies.

Reconstruction of autobiographical memory

Reconstructing a meaningful autobiographical memory from a flag ceremony is a complex process influenced by context, intention and mediating symbolic systems. First, there is the actual, embodied flag ceremony. The meaning of this ceremony is constructed through symbolically mediated actions, where the national flag and the other symbols constitute 'a quasi-text' that helps to interpret participants' sensory-motor experiences (Ezzy, 1998). The meanings of the symbols are partly derived

from the related embodied social practices (Griswold, 1987). Second, people use natural language or other symbolic means (e.g. visual signs) to communicate their past embodied experiences of a flag ceremony. By using these culturally shared conceptual systems, they reconstruct the meaning of their experience and transmit it to others (Burke, 1966). Thus, symbolically mediated embodied practices – and then memory reconstructions based on shared conceptual symbols – help people to mentally organise their experiences (e.g. this is a flag ceremony). Without these cultural resources, embodied experiences would be chaotic, and their remembering would just be a ‘repetition of a series of reactions’ without meaningful purpose, as noted by Bartlett (1932, p. 203). This means that culturally shared symbolic systems (e.g. natural language) are an inseparable part of meaningful experiences and memory reconstructions (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Finally, memories are always transmitted in a specific social context. As Shotter (1990) points out, remembering is also a rhetorical process: to be intelligible, memory reconstructions must be argumentatively developed. In this study I refer to verbally reported memory reconstructions of flag ceremonies as ‘autobiographical narratives’.

The context of the study

The social context of this study was a school lesson where upper-secondary-school students were asked to evaluate pictures relating to Finland and to write for the researcher about meaningful national symbols. The study focuses on this age group because meaning-making and the construction of identity are especially heightened in adolescence due to the physiological maturity of this stage of development and the demands of the social environment (McAdams, 2001; McLean, 2005). For example, in Finland, young men have to decide whether they will choose military or non-military service in the year they turn 18, as there is general conscription for men in Finland. For women, military service is voluntary. Most of my respondents turned 18 in the year they participated in this study. Although the sociopsychological literature has acknowledged that national ceremonies play an

important role in national socialisation (Barrett, 2007; Billig, 1995), empirical research among children and adolescents is still very limited (see, however, Cheung & Li, 2011; Rippberger & Staudt, 2003).

The national context of this study is Finland. Finland was part of Sweden until 1809, and then of the Russian Empire until 1917. In the first half of the 19th century, Finnish nationalism mainly focused on the Finnish language and the development of national high culture. Gradually, it also became a political project (Alapuro, 1988). Under the Russian Empire, Finland had autonomous status, and Finns were allowed to develop their own national institutions and non-governmental organisations. This was important for the development of Finnish nationalism (Alapuro, 1988), which included two sometimes contradictory ideals: a promise of democracy, and a belief that there existed one uniform national will (Liikanen, 2005).

The flag with blue cross and white background was first used by a Finnish yacht club at the beginning of the 1860s, and its roots can be traced back to the Russian navy. There were many competing designs for the national flag, and preferences for particular flags reflected larger political and cultural divisions (Klinge, 1982). Hence, when Finland gained its independence in December 1917, there was intense debate about the national flag's colours and design. The temporary national flag was red-yellow. In January 1918, a civil war began which ended in May 1918. This war also brought heraldic changes: the blue and white flag became the official flag. However, only during the Second World War, when Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union, did all strata of Finnish society finally adopt its use (Alapuro, 1997). Thus, it has been suggested that during the wars the flag became the symbol of shared sacrifice (Tepora, 2007).

The size and colours of the Finnish flag, and official flag days, are prescribed by law. Independence Day on 6 December and Midsummer Day are two of the most important flag days. Independence Day festivities are common in schools and they often include a flag ceremony. Midsummer Day is the official Flag Day, although Midsummer's history can be traced to ancient

solstice festivities. The Midsummer Day flag-raising in homes and summer cottages is an example of the constructed nature of national ceremonies: it was strongly promoted in the 1920s by flag advocates (Klinge, 1982; Tepora, 2007). Nowadays, the flag ceremony is usually a simple but respectful ritual, which includes a raising of the flag and sometimes a song. In parades or processions, the flag is carried first. Given that flag ceremonies are routinely repeated in the everyday lives of Finnish adolescents, Finland provides an excellent context in which to study autobiographical memories associated with these ceremonies and how meaning is constructed in them.

Method

Respondents and procedure

The data for this analysis come from a project which follows whether and how the meanings of Finnish national symbols change through time among upper-secondary-school students (see Finell, 2005, 2012). So far data have been collected at three time points: 2002, 2008 and 2014. A total of 857 respondents were recruited across all three years. The distribution of gender, age, ethnic background and father's education and levels of respondents' national attachment are reported in Online Appendix 1. In 2002 and 2014 the data were collected in the same five schools in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Since one of these schools could not arrange an opportunity for data collection in 2008, the data were collected only in four of the schools in that year. The data were collected during school hours in the spring term.

The data collection was in three phases. In the *first phase*, respondents were shown pictures related to Finland: 50 pictures in 2002, 51 in 2008 and 48 in 2014. These pictures were projected onto the wall for 10 seconds each, and were presented in the same order each year. The respondents' task was to evaluate each picture on a four-point scale in terms of how well it symbolised Finland. The pictures had been chosen by first listing the Finnish national symbols presented in the literature in

accordance with the dimensions of the nation (i.e. a cultural unit, a genealogical unit, a political unit and a territorial unit: Saukkonen, 1999). Then these symbols were categorised into thematic groups. These thematic groups included, for example, pictures concerning nature, political elites and culture. Finally, pictures that were less typical examples of the same theme were added, in order to create variation among the pictures. The same pictures were used in each year, except for slight changes due to the six-year gap between the three data collection points (for more information on the pictures and their selection criteria, see Online Appendix 2).

In the *second phase*, on the pictures with the highest symbolic value, respondents were then asked to choose two or three that evoked mental images, memories and emotions, and to write an essay about each picture based on a set of questions. They had approximately 40 minutes to write these essays. This study analyses only the essays that were written about the picture of Finland's national flag (N=212 respondents, 25% of all respondents) and which described a flag ceremony (N=80, 38% of the flag essays; see analytical strategy below). The picture in question shows a flag on a pole waving in the wind (see the picture in Appendix 1). This study focuses only on the parts of the essays which answered the following questions: (1) describe your mental image/memory in detail; (2) do you remember what feelings you had then? If so, try to describe them; (3) does the memory evoke feelings in you at the moment? If it does, what kind of feelings are they? The essays' lengths varied from one sentence to several pages. Since the content of the flag essays was much the same each year, the analysis uses data from all three years. Finally, in the *third phase*, respondents completed a questionnaire.

I used this novel data collection method for various reasons. First, it enabled me to receive more authentic autobiographical narratives about national symbols than I would have gathered by directly asking about certain contexts. Second, by using a relatively large quantity of pictures I was trying to ensure that respondents were able to choose national symbols that were meaningful for them. Third, when writing essays, the respondents could express themselves in peace, without needing to

take their peers or a strange adult (i.e. interviewer) into account, as would be the case in focus groups or interviews (see Muldoon, McLaughlin & Trew, 2007). Fourth, this was an economical and systematic way to collect a large qualitative data set and the process was easy to repeat.

Analytical strategy

The analysis comprised two phases. In *the first phase*, following the principles of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), I coded all the essays about the picture of the flag (N=212) according to (1) the social practice they referred to (e.g. raising the flag) and (2) the context where it took place (e.g. school). I then categorised the narratives into ‘raw categories’ based on those codes (e.g. ‘participating in a flag ceremony at school’). At this stage I excluded three types of essay from the analysis: (1) essays that did not include an autobiographical narrative (e.g. ‘*I do not have any specific memory*’ or ‘*My mental image is war. I was not born yet*’); (2) essays that included an autobiographical narrative but did not discuss a flag ceremony where the respondent was personally present (e.g. ‘*I was on holiday in France, and when I saw Finnish flag [...]*’ or ‘*We played soldiers with my friend and we sang “Siniristilippumme”*’¹); (3) essays that were too fragmented to be analysed (e.g. ‘*Flag-raising at school*’). The final data comprised 80 essays on flag ceremonies (50 female, 27 male, three unreported gender; mean age 17.2; see Online Appendix 1, Table A). The same essay could include many narratives. The questionnaire data allowed comparisons of the levels of national attachment between those who did and did not write about flag ceremonies. There were no significant differences between the samples (see Online Appendix 1).

In the second phase, drawing on the understanding that reconstructing an autobiographical memory is a social action that is influenced by context, intention and the symbolic system that mediates it (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Shotter, 1990), I used thematic narrative analysis (Riessman,

¹ ‘*Siniristilippu*’ (‘blue cross’) refers to the design of the Finnish flag. It is also denoted in this article as the Flag Song.

2008) supplemented with an analysis of the rhetoric used (Comrie, 1976; Schiffrin, 1981). Different types of analytical method can be combined in narrative analysis to deepen the analysis (Riessman, 2008). I continued the analysis by asking whether and how the narratives in the same ‘raw categories’ differed from each other in terms of (1) the kinds of emotional concept and evaluative statement used; (2) how relationships between individuals were described; (3) how the ceremony was described; (4) the kinds of social category and abstract concept discussed. With the aid of these questions I identified themes that either connected or distinguished the narratives in each raw category. I repeated this analytical procedure several times, ending up with three autobiographical narrative categories including 12 themes. Finally, in order to clarify the essence of these categories, I reanalysed the material, ending up with nine final themes (see Figure 1). The extracts are translated from Finnish and I use pseudonyms.

Results

Based on the analyses, I constructed three autobiographical narrative categories. In the *(Dis)honoured Flag* narratives the narrator was among a group, typically a large mass, following an externally conducted national ceremony at summer camp, home or school, the latter being the most typical in these narratives. The *Deserved Flag* narratives emphasised the individual’s performance in front of significant others, such as family members at home or friends at a scout or confirmation camp. There were only a few narratives from school contexts. The focus in the *Loved Flag* narratives was on belonging, security and intimacy among friends and family members, as well as nostalgia. All of these narratives related to family and camp contexts, except a few about school events. The narrative categories are discussed in more detail below, and the themes and their relationships to the categories are presented in Figure 1. One narrative could include features from more than one category.

Figure 1

(Dis)honoured Flag

In these often short narratives, the respondents reconstructed their past – usually recurring – experiences of flag ceremonies. These narratives typically lacked detail, and included fragmentary depictions of how the respondents participated in the ceremony by standing still, watching the flag, and sometimes singing a national song with others, usually during their school's Independence Day festivities in December.

Unlike in the other narratives, the respondents typically avoided specific references to others. Except for some references to authority figures (e.g. *head teacher*), respondents reconstructed the collective context using nonspecific words and phrases such as *all*, *pupils*, *children in the playground* and *the whole school* when referring to those present at the event. In other words, in contrast to the other analytical categories, there were very few references to single individuals, nor were there depictions of interactions or emotional bonds between specific participants. The focus was solely on the national ceremony itself and the national symbol being present in it. Thus, the respondents depicted a group context that offered two kinds of role: single authority figures and a group of people following the ceremony. The respondents assumed the latter role, although they had different attitudes towards the ceremony. They either described it as an externally conducted ritual, which was meaningless or coercive (*'it was quite cold and boring,' meaningless act*) or experienced it as reverent, patriotic or unspecifically positive (*'everybody stood still and respectfully when the flag was raised' collective reverence*).

The important thing here is that these two themes reflected different sides of the same coin. That is, the respondents made sense of the embodied practice either by using the meanings afforded by patriotic discourse or by rejecting them. Regardless what they chose to do, they did not associate other specific meanings from other group contexts with the ceremony. This was not the case in other analytical categories, where the meanings associated

with different group contexts tended to fuse. It is notable that only a minority of respondents whose narrative were categorised in the (Dis)honoured Flag category (19 %) reported that they experienced the flag ceremony as coercive or meaningless. A few expressed mixed orientations or did not report any orientation.

Here I present two autobiographical narratives representing the theme of meaningless act, and then three narratives on collective reverence.

Toni:

When I was very small I remember watching when the flag was raised. This happened sometimes when I was in primary school and there were hundreds of people. I can't remember my feelings but probably they were just normal. Well, I do remember that it was damned cold outside without a hat. (2008)

Sini:

The first image the Finnish flag evokes is the Independence Day celebrations at school. The flag is not especially on display, but the colours, blue and white, are there in the decorations. All the pupils always stand in the school hall and try to last until the end of the event without passing out or leaning against anything. [...]
The memories from Independence Days are usually pretty boring. The celebrations have usually been pretty forced. (2002)

These are typical narratives from the (Dis)honoured Flag category. Both include little detail, and the recurrent and collective nature of the ceremony is underlined with words such as *all the pupils* and *always*, and with the present tense or nonspecific time references such as *sometimes* (Comrie, 1976). However, at the end of his narrative, Toni adds: *'it was damned cold outside without a hat.'* In this way he stresses the coercive nature of his past experience

and his orientation towards the ceremony. Sini also emphasises the external and disciplined nature of the ceremony by referring to the physical discomfort generated by the event (*'without passing out or leaning against anything'*) as well as pupils' passive position (*'the celebrations have usually been pretty forced'*). The third theme of the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives is visible in these quotations. It relates to the only way the respondents could participate in the ceremony: by being part of a controlled mass of more or less disciplined bodies (**discipline of the body**). Given their passive role, self-control (in addition to singing) was the only visible indication of participation that was afforded to them by the ceremony. As Wetherell (2014, pp.149) puts it, ideological habits of banal nationalism are deeply embodied in 'the arrangements of bodies'. In these narratives, the meaning or meaninglessness of the ritual were actualised through these arrangements. This is also evident in the narratives below.

Mari:

From primary school I also remember Independence Day celebrations during which we always stood up when the flag was brought into the hall. The Finnish flag seemed like the guest of honour at the celebrations, to whom one showed respect.
(2002)

Minna:

The picture reminds me of earlier Independence Days, when we gathered together to watch the flag-raising in the school playground. The whole school was always present and the events were always very solemn, and they made you feel very festive and patriotic. (2008)

These narratives too follow the structure typical of all the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives: there is little detail, and the ceremony is described as a routine, generic event. Nevertheless, these last two

narratives differ from the previous two in one significant way. Although concrete action verbs such as *watch* and *stand* are used in all the narratives, Mari and Minna also use more abstract concepts, such as *respect* and *patriotism*. In this way, they present these past flag ceremonies at school as meaningful, embodied social practices (*'we always stood up when the flag was brought into the hall. The Finnish flag seemed like the guest of honour'*) which evoke positive emotion (*'they made you feel very festive and patriotic'*). The flag ceremony is presented as a collective event that allows adolescents to experience their nation and construct their national identity, as in the following narrative:

Leena:

We raised the flag and sang songs every year on Independence Day when I was at comprehensive school. So, in other words, from a very early age I have learned to honour Finland and the Finnish flag. Thus, it is part of me. (2014)

Deserved Flag

The Deserved Flag narratives depicted respondents' solo performances in front of significant others (*'both hosts', 'my father', 'veterans living nearby'*). These narratives of specific episodes were more detailed than those in the previous category, and the active voice was used (*'I hold the flag'*). The first important theme in these narratives related to in-group members' acceptance of the performance they were following (**in-group acceptance**); usually the respondents were handling the flag in front of peers or relatives. Whereas being part of a faceless mass and collective reverence were important themes in the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives, conducting a unique act in the ceremony, and its acceptance by significant others, are at the core of the Deserved Flag narratives (see Figure 1).

Heidi:

I was a young child in kindergarten and I remember when once there was Father's Day. At that time, my father asked me to raise the flag with him. I had not done it before, and it was a big thing to me. We were by the flagpole in the back garden and I was allowed to do the whole thing almost by myself. This made me feel important. [...] When I raised the flag little by little, I felt responsible, I was tense and I was afraid that I would screw up. (2014)

The second theme in the Deserved Flag narratives related to the idea that handling the flag was a moral act which also determined the actor's worth (**individual's moral value**). This was apparent in respondents' reports about whether they managed to perform the ceremony correctly, and how they and significant others reacted to their performance. References to self-conscious emotions were common, although some respondents also depicted their failure to raise the flag with humour. Finally, unlike the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives, in Deserved Flag narratives the social categories used in identity expressions ('*I am proud to be a Finn*') were not always the nation; respondents could refer to the category of scout as well ('*I am a scout*'). This relates to the theme of **indivisible identities**. Below are three examples.

Anna:

As a scout I have often raised the flag, but one time I remember especially well. We had a troop spring party at [place name], so there were lots of people. I was 10 years old, and my friend and I had to raise the flag. I was very nervous and didn't want to do it at first. However, the leaders encouraged us, and the flag-raising was successful. After that I felt relieved, but I was proud of us. We had not raised the flag very often but everything went fine. The experience was unforgettable for a small scout. (2008)

Laura:

I was at scout camp, about 12 years old. Then my good friend and I were given the honour of raising the flag one morning. All the other cubs and scouts stood in the circle a little bit further away as we were standing next to the flag. My friend slowly raised the flag, and I stood beside [him/her], saluting the flag. I remember, at least, that the situation was exciting. I was then extremely proud of the fact that we had specifically been chosen to raise the flag. (2002)

Tomi:

I was at a summer cottage celebrating Independence Day. I was about eight years old, and my father let me raise the flag – I was really proud of myself. [...] I looked at the flag and felt part of something great. I am proud to be a Finn. (2002)

Typically for the Deserved Flag narratives, these respondents represent themselves as having an involved and distinct role by using verbs in an active voice and referring to themselves with the pronoun *I*. Furthermore, they describe the audience (*'all the other cubs and scouts'*) and their own interactions with significant others (*'the leaders encouraged us'*). Three interrelated themes are evident here.

First, Anna, Laura and Tomi verbally reconstruct experiences in which they tried to follow a normative script based on the belief that others were evaluating them. Through the use of emotional terms they express their personal determination to follow this script and their worth in relation to the moral community. The emotional terms are used in various ways: they describe their performance as a thrilling experience that was emotionally charged (*'I was very nervous'*), and they use the word *pride*, although in different ways. Anna presents it as an outcome of successful performance (*'we had not raised the flag very often but everything went fine'*), whereas Laura and Tomi present it as a

reaction to the knowledge that they had been chosen to conduct the ritual (*'I was then extremely proud of the fact that we had specifically been chosen'*). Thus the flag ceremony has two intertwined meanings. It is a means by which an individual can earn their in-group's respect by performing the role perfectly, and it enables an in-group to show its acceptance as a tribute (*'my good friend and I were given the honour of raising the flag'*). In both cases the respect associated with the flag is presented as extending to the one who has the right to hold it.

Second, although all the narratives describe a flag ceremony, the only social category mentioned in Anna's and Laura's narratives is the scouts (*'As a scout I have often raised the flag'*). In these narratives the flag-raising is explicitly presented as an expression of scout identity. This illustrates the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the different social categories in these narratives: a scout (*'as a scout'*) and a Finn (*'often raised the flag [of Finland]'*). Their meanings are mutually constitutive (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Similarly, Tomi's narrative illustrates nicely how the respondents intertwine acceptance by significant others with respect for the flag, and extend these elements to define their national identity (*'I [...] felt part of something great. I am proud to be a Finn'*).

Loved Flag

In the Loved Flag narratives, the flag ceremony was presented as a nostalgic and intimate experience with close friends and relatives (*'It is mainly just a moment that I spent with my family, with the people I love'*). Although it might include autobiographical narratives of raising a flag, for example, these narratives did not discuss whether the respondents managed to perform the ritual properly. Instead they focused on the warm relationships with the significant others participating in the flag-raising: *'I remember how I admired Grandpa's work when he explained how the flag should be raised. My mother was there too and maybe it was spring. I was very happy.'* Thus, the themes of

nostalgia, intimacy and **homeland** are at the core of the Loved Flag narratives and distinguish it from the other narratives (see Figure 1).

In the following narratives, the respondents reconstructed autobiographical narratives from a repetitive flag-raising ritual in which they had taken part.

Hanna:

It was the only time in the day when the shouting, running, playing & singing stopped. It was important that the flag was raised solemnly while everybody was standing looking dignified, with mouths shut and caps in hand. Included in this memory is the beautiful lakeside scenery, sunshine, and my good friend's hand in mine. It's all so Finnish. I then felt happy because it was summer and because of my friends. I also felt devout and full of pride... because all 30 people were looking up to the flag when they recited morning prayer. (2002)

Ari:

Annual flag-raising ceremony during Midsummer at the summer cottage. 'Siniristolippu' is sung as the flag is raised. There are people from neighbouring summer cottages and my own relatives. It feels cosy. The sauna is also heated. [...] Such homely moments always evoke warm summery feelings. (2002)

Läsa:

It is a hot summer day, children are running in the garden (cousins, neighbours) and Grandpa is playing the accordion. The sky is cloudless and blue and the lake

glitters. The birches have been set up on both sides of the door.² A festive moment starts when all [the people] gather around the flagpole. Grandpa and my father carry the flag with dignity. It is quiet, some of the smallest ones still scream somewhere... The flag is raised, and we start to sing 'Siniristilippumme'. We watch how the big flag rises, and I am tense, [wondering] whether it will begin to flap [in the wind]. The moment is very happy and impressive. We look at the flag, and we sing the last verse as our family does, loud and high! [...] Now I remember the loveliness of the summer, my grandparents as healthy, the whole family together and the moment dedicated to the flag & song. (2014)

Hanna starts her narrative from a confirmation camp by emphasising the importance of proper behaviour, in much the same way as respondents in the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives (*'mouths shut and caps in hand'*), but she then continues, *'included in this memory is beautiful lakeside scenery, sunshine, and my good friend's hand in mine.'* This quotation reflects in a nutshell the three interrelated themes that distinguish these narratives from other categories. First, spring, summer and the beauty of nature are an important theme in Loved Flag narratives (**homeland**, *'I could appreciate Finnish nature [...] and listen to the voices of the forest'*). Liisa, for example, refers to this theme in many ways (*'the sky is cloudless and blue, and the lake glitters'*). Thus she is able express her relations not only to other people, but also to the material space and the landscape, which provides her national identity with 'an ontological mooring' (Tilley, 2006, p. 20).

References to close relationships with relatives and friends indicate a second theme in the Loved Flag narratives (**intimacy**). For example, in Hanna's narrative, the meaning of the flag-raising expands to include the experience of watching the flag ceremony hand in hand with her friend.

² This common tradition is part of Midsummer celebrations in Finland.

Friendship is also present in the Deserved Flag narratives, but there the focus is on acceptance by others and successful performance. In his narrative, Ari emphasises intimacy by referring to another intimate 'ritual' – going to the sauna (*'the sauna is also heated'*). These two rituals, the flag-raising ceremony and going to the sauna, constituted a *homely moment*. In these narratives the flag ceremony is not only presented as a national ceremony; it is a ritual that highlights and strengthens friendships and family ties.

Liisa uses the present tense when reconstructing an autobiographical memory from Midsummer festivals at her grandparents' place and this emphasises its repeated nature and the vividness of the memory (Schiffrin, 1981). Then Liisa describes her whole family singing a song and watching as *'the big flag rises.'* Once again, social categories are intertwined and difficult to separate (**indivisible identities**): *'we look at the flag, and we sing the last verse as our family does, loud and high!'* As in Ari's narrative, the flag-raising ceremony is not only presented as a national ceremony; it is a family ritual.

Finally, the Loved Flag narratives differs from the other narratives in the third theme of **nostalgia**, which is closely interrelated with the other two. In all three narratives, the past ceremony is presented as a happy and nostalgic moment among friends or relatives; as in Ari's and Liisa's narratives, the memories usually come from far back in childhood, where one cannot return: *'I remember the loveliness of the summer, my grandparents as healthy, the whole family together.'* The final narrative below also illustrates the theme of nostalgia.

Anton:

One of my first memories related to the flag is raising it in the morning dew when we were at [place name] camp during one of my childhood summers. Watching the flag being raised against a backdrop of spruce trees glistening in the morning dew was a beautiful, wonderful sight. [...] The memory does evoke feelings, but mostly about wanting to be an innocent child just for a day. On the other hand, one also wonders why people don't raise the flag any more. The strongest feeling is longing. (2008)

Anton also describes a flag-raising ritual at summer camp, but unlike Hanna, Ari or Liisa, he does not mention other people or interactions between them. Rather he focuses on the beauty of the flag in the morning dew (*'a beautiful, wonderful sight'*). It is a nostalgic and sensitive description, and he goes on to contrast those days with the present, wondering *'why people don't raise the flag any more'*. Similarly, he reflects on his lost childhood (*'wanting to be an innocent child just for a day'*), drawing a parallel between his childhood and raising the flag: just as his childhood is lost in the past, so is the flag-raising ritual. The meaning of the flag ceremony expands to symbolically represent all of childhood, as another respondent also points out: *'nice memories from childhood, happy childhood'*.

Discussion

This paper has analysed adolescents' autobiographical narratives of flag ceremonies. It has identified nine themes that constituted the essence of three analytical categories. In the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives these themes touched on being part of a group, typically a large mass, of more or less disciplined bodies that were supposed to conduct an externally controlled action simultaneously. Depending on the respondents, they either attached patriotic or non-specifically positive meanings to this embodied practice or else defined it as meaningless or coercive. The Deserved and Loved Flag narratives typically focused on smaller groups. The themes of the Deserved Flag narratives discussed solo performances which were recognised and validated by significant others and accompanied by self-conscious emotions such as pride and shame. The Loved Flag narratives included nostalgic and intimate reconstructions of flag ceremonies with loved ones surrounded by beautiful nature. The ceremony was presented as a ritual which strengthened ties between the participants and produced moments of happiness and security. The theme of indivisible identities was shared by both Deserved and Loved Flag narratives. As this is the most important finding, I discuss it in more detail below.

These categories reflect different past experiences and meanings attached to the flag ceremony. They suggest that adolescents can have very different national identity-related experiences, although the collective act itself (flag-raising) and the performed collective identity (national identity) are the same. These experiences can be less or more emotionally important and include different material objects and people. Since it is likely that young people participate in numerous flag ceremonies, it follows that their memories, and hence the meanings they associate with their own national group, are multidimensional and can include contradictory elements. This was apparent in the data. The same respondent could depict school Independence Day celebrations as a coercive performance without emotional involvement, and then continue with warm summer memories of their grandparents. This

also means that meanings associated with one's own national identity can be multidimensional and even contradictory.

This paper contributes to many sociopsychological debates. First, although the social identity approach emphasises that people have multiple and variable selves (Reicher & Hopkins, 2016), at least its traditional reading postulates that only one social category (i.e. collective identity) is psychologically salient to a specific individual at one specific moment (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). Second, in socio-psychological studies, large-scale social categories (e.g. a nation) tend to be separated from intermediate categories (e.g. work networks) and face-to-face groups (e.g. a family) (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013; Lickel, et al., 2000). However, as the analysis revealed, it was very difficult in narratives to separate different categories and group levels from each other because the meanings associated with social categories were inextricably related (see Loseke, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011) as the theme of 'indivisible identities' demonstrates.

There are probably at least two reasons why this theme was strongly visible in the narratives. The first relates to the nature of the reminiscence process: how people reconstruct meaningful autobiographical narratives from cultural objects through symbolically mediated embodied practices and shared conceptual symbols (see Introduction). The second relates to the nature of the spatial practices that respondents depicted in their narratives (Nightingale, 2011). To put it simply, according to these narratives, the defining moment of the ceremony was when people gathered around the flag. At this moment, both the national group and other contextually meaningful categories – such as gender and family (i.e. reference group, see Allport, 1954/1979) – were materialised for those who were participating (Tilley, 2006). This materialisation was actualised by symbols (e.g. the national flag), embodied practices (e.g. standing), the people present (e.g. family members) and other spatial objects (e.g. the cottage). At least three interrelated things follow from this materialization. (1) A nation is no longer only an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), but is also an 'experienced

community' with a particular embodied and material form, including important reference groups such as friends and relatives, sensory-motor experiences, specific places and artefacts (see Tilley, 2006). (2) Through synchronised actions, participants are able show their devotion to both the reference group and the nation simultaneously, and thus to strengthen the identity of both groups. (3) Dense ritual actions link the national context with this reference group and the meanings, moral norms and emotions associated with it (Stasch, 2011). For these reasons, the meanings associated with different social categories become fused in the autobiographical Deserved and Loved Flag narratives. In the (Dis)honoured Flag narratives this fusion does not happen, because in them the focus is only on the category of national flag and ceremony. One reason for this might be that most of these narratives were from a school context, which did not afford any roles or social categories other than those of being part of a large mass of Finnish students.

This finding is important for various reasons. It shows that the emotional power of national identity has deep roots in people's everyday lives, in close relationships and intimate moments. It also shows that, although the meanings associated with different social categories cannot be reductively conflated, they can be mutually constitutive, and we are not usually able to distinguish between them in the flow of everyday life (Yuval-Davis, 2011) or in our embodied holistic memory reconstructions (see e.g. Barsalou et al., 2005). Finally, it underlines the important role of bottom-up processes in the formation of national identities as well as the role of group-related autobiographical memories in them. Thus although people with access to power try to control our embodied memories through collective events and habits (Bell, 2003; Connerton, 1989), in the end the meanings associated with these events cannot be totally controlled.

Second, this study has shown that respondents were able to reconstruct various autobiographical narratives evoked by a single picture of national flag. Thanks to this ability of material objects to transmit meanings over time and space (Tilley, 2011), a national flag was a symbol not only of the nation, but also of a loving grandfather, home and nature, for example. This finding demonstrates that

the private and collective, material and immaterial meanings associated with different social categories intersect in national symbols, which further explains the emotional power of the nation category. This ability of material symbols might also shed more light on whether and how national ceremonies or other collective events can produce long-lasting emotional ties and identities. Material objects and embodied practices in these events both produce and conserve meanings, and then transmit those meanings to other contexts. In this way their presence provides the collective identity with continuity and reminds people in new situations of the group's important values and norms. Thus, the long-lasting effects of collective events may be due not only to discourses or memory reconstructions, but also to materiality and its ability to organise experience.

Finally, in the narratives, references to the intergroup comparisons that are at the core of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) were missing; apart from one respondent³, none explicitly referred to out-groups. This finding is in line with socio-psychological literature, which states that in-groups are psychologically primary (Brewer, 1999). However, otherness was not wholly absent from the narratives. Although the ceremony was often depicted as a warm-hearted manifestation of banal nationalism, at the symbolic level war, defence of the borders and the ideal of sacrifice were present (see Paasi, 1996; Tepora, 2007). A few respondents referred to Second World War veterans. Furthermore, some reported that during the flag ceremony they sang the 'Flag Song', which goes: *'Our blue cross flag, we swear to the heart: to live and die for you is our highest desire.'* This finding contributes to the debate on whether 'hot' and 'banal' nationalism can be analytically divided, as Billig (1995) proposes (e.g. Paasi, 2016). It suggests that at the level of autobiographical narratives and embodied practices, these different forms of nationalism merge into one integrated whole.

This study also contributes to the national socialisation literature. It supports the notion that one's experiences in childhood can be an important resource for national identity construction; some respondents even symbolically linked their entire childhoods to a flag ceremony. Parallel findings

³ Furthermore, there were two respondents who referred to Finns as an outgroup.

have been noted among adults as well (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011; Koester, 1997). This study also demonstrates that the meanings of honour and loyalty emphasised by nationalist ideology (Poole, 1999) are learned in family, peer and school contexts (Barrett, 2007; Muldoon, O'Donnell & Minescu, 2017; Stern, 1995) and that grandfathers in particular may play a special role in this process. Indeed, many of the narratives referred to tight control over who was allowed to touch the flag, and if the gender of an adult flag raiser was mentioned, it was a male and usually an elderly male. This is in line with previous research on the gendered nature of nationalism in different countries (Hogan, 2003). National ceremonies, like most rituals, maintain and duplicate the hierarchy of wider society (Stasch, 2011).

The strengths of this study include the fact that respondents were not specifically asked to produce autobiographical narratives about flag ceremonies, and that the data were collected at three time points. The content of the narratives was very similar each time. Furthermore, the questionnaire data allowed comparisons of the levels of national attachment and background variables between those who did and did not write about flag ceremonies. Given that national attachment was measured only after the essays were written, we do not know whether respondents' levels of national attachment affected their choice of picture. Other limitations of this study include the fact that the essays were collected only from upper-secondary-school students, and no young people from other contexts were included. Furthermore, the data were collected during school lessons, which might have produced more normative answers than would be collected in other contexts.

This study raises many new topics for future research. One important task would be to analyse gender differences in these kinds of autobiographical narrative. In the present study, girls provided more autobiographical narratives about flag ceremonies than boys, and their essays were usually longer and more detailed. This difference may, however, reflect differences in writing skill and motivation rather than in actual memories; there is a large gender gap in language skills in Finland (Torppa, Eklund, Sulkunen, Niemi & Ahonen, 2018). This is why it would also be important to use

different data collection methods that are less dependent on writing skill and motivation. In addition, it would be important to better understand whether different autobiographical narratives regarding national flag ceremonies reflect differences in the political attitudes of the respondents or their parents, for example. It is clear that the use of a national flag can be a politically contested issue. Finally, almost all the respondents belonged to the national majority group. Hence, it would be important to analyse the kinds of autobiographical narrative that minority group members associate with the national symbols of their host nation.

To conclude, this study provides novel information about adolescents' autobiographical memories of flag ceremonies in Finland, including experiences of being accepted, being part of a larger whole and being loved. It further highlights that when national identity is studied from the perspective of social psychology, understanding it as a single social category is not sufficient. Instead, analysis must take into account the various ways it intersects with other social categories in individuals' pasts, and how these different, interrelated social categories and their associated meanings affect the way past experiences are emotionally and mentally recreated in the national meaning-making process in the present.

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Appendix 1



Figure 1. The flag picture (Kolho, M./Lehtikuva (1999). Facts about Finland. Helsinki: Otava)

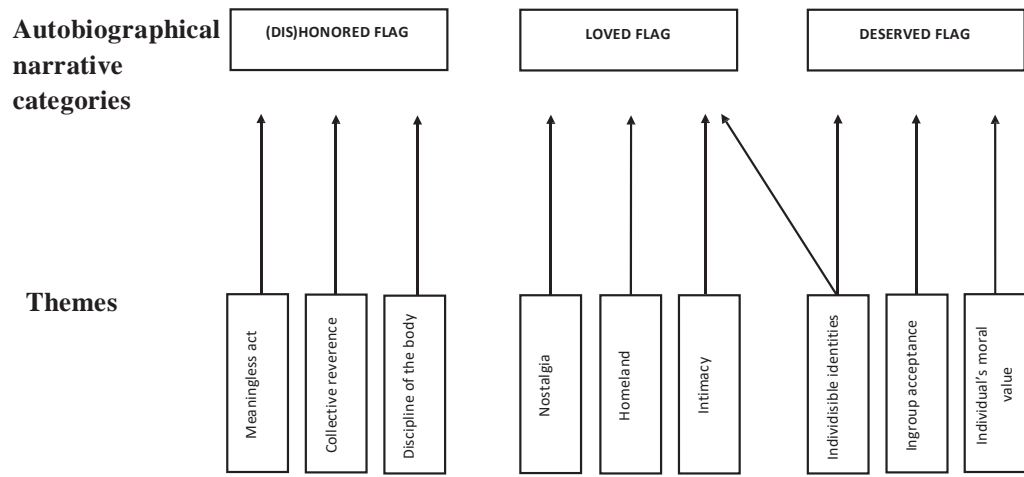


Figure 2. Themes and their relations to autobiographical narrative categories.