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Ethnic boundary making among Swedish migrants in Helsinki

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ABSTRACT


This is a study of ethnic boundary-making strategies promoted by Swedish migrants in Finland. The results are based on interviews with a sample of migrants in Helsinki without previous personal connection to Finland. The interviewees can be considered privileged migrants, and the study provides new information on the strategies of ethnic boundary making promoted by members of privileged ethnic groups. In Helsinki, the migrants from Sweden navigate a social field with local ethnic boundaries, including an autochthonous Swedish-speaking minority. Despite social integration in Finnish society, the migrants choose the strategy of boundary blurring, whereby the interviewees wished to question the importance of ethnic and national belonging. This choice of strategy can be explained by the ambivalence they experience in navigating the local ethnic categories and language policies. Thus, the results describe how societal structures shape individual strategies of ethnic boundary making.

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Introduction

Swedish citizens who move from Sweden to Finland must make strategic choices concerning ethnic boundary making in a new social context. This interview study focuses on a sample of relatively privileged migrants who have settled in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. While the migration of Finnish citizens to Sweden has been an extensively studied migration phenomenon, the numerically smaller migration of Swedish citizens to Finland has not been studied much. Yet, a study of the migration of privileged and skilled migrants can provide significant new insights into processes of

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ethnic boundary making. The results of this study outline how the migrants from Sweden that I interviewed have navigated the local social field in Helsinki involving specific ethnic boundaries connected to linguistic and national belonging. In Helsinki, Swedish is a minority language of the autochthonous and well-established national minority of Swedish-speaking Finns, here referred to as the “Finland Swedes”.¹ Thus, the Swedish citizens enter a new social field with specific ethnic boundaries that they strategically have to navigate. The interviews provide information on the strategies that the migrants promote to position themselves both in terms of identity claims and everyday strategic choices. The study builds upon the theories of ethnic boundary making as strategic choices of social actors (Wimmer 2008a, 2013). These theories have mostly been applied to study strategies of sub-ordinated ethnic groups, therefore this study provides significant new information on the strategies of ethnic boundary making promoted by members of privileged groups.

The Swedish migrants can be considered a relatively privileged group of migrants since as Nordic migrants they largely avoid the social stigma of being “immigrants” and their position in the Finnish labour market is generally good. A key aspect is also a high degree of intermarriage between Swedish and Finnish citizens that supports a social integration in Finnish society. Despite a high degree of social integration, the results of this study indicate, somewhat surprisingly, that Swedish migrants still often choose to promote a strategy of ethnic boundary blurring. In situations in which the ethnic boundaries are found to be limiting or challenging to navigate, the interviewees choose to avoid being identified by ethnic categories. The results support the argument that the degree of contestedness of ethnic boundaries, not only the strength of boundaries influence the strategic choices of actors (cf. Wimmer 2008b; Beier and Kroneberg 2013). The theoretical contribution of this study is to highlight that a lack of consensus concerning ethnic boundaries also has consequences for the strategic choices of privileged ethnic groups. When ethnic relations involve contested systems of social hierarchies, the benefits and advantages of ethnic group belonging are not obvious. Thus, this study describes why actors who are in privileged social position in specific situations choose ethnic boundary blurring as a strategy, although this strategy in previous studies mostly has been attributed to sub-ordinated groups.

Ethnic boundary making

The classical book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* edited by anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) formulated a research programme that emphasized the making and maintenance of ethnic boundaries as the key to understanding ethnic groups. This broadly social constructivist approach conceives that

“ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves” (Barth 1969, 10). The ethnic boundary-making approach provides an analytical framework that has been developed over the years and it provides a general sociological understanding of ethnic groups that can also take into consideration social structures and the interdependency of agency and structure. Andreas Wimmer (2013) provides an elaborate synthesis of theories of ethnic boundary making, with which he aims to provide a comparative analytic of how and why ethnicity matters to different degrees and in different forms in different societies, situations and periods. This synthesis also infuses “a good dose of Bourdieusian sociology into the study of ethnic boundaries” (Wimmer 2013, 4), which comprises the fact that actors act strategically in specific social fields and are predisposed by the habitus they possess (Bourdieu 1984). The analytical framework outlined by Wimmer “assumes that the boundary-making strategies pursued by individuals will depend on institutional incentives, their position in hierarchies of economic, political and symbolic power, and their existing social networks” (Wimmer 2013, 208). In his key book *Ethnic Boundary Making*, Wimmer (2013) analyses ethnic boundaries that involve categories that are defined by reference to ethnicity, race and nationhood, which provides for an analysis of ethnicity in a broad sense (cf. Wimmer 2014).

A key aspect of Wimmer’s theory is that actors always act in social fields with pre-existing ethnic boundaries; this aspect avoids the theoretical binary of instrumentalism versus primordialism that many theories of ethnicity suffer from. Furthermore, the theory maintains that actors choose different strategies in relation to the power hierarchies of the social fields in question. Thus, the possible identity claims and strategic choices of individuals in each social field are not indefinite, and the theory emphasizes the strategic nature of the choices made by actors (Wimmer 2008a, 2008b, 2013). An actor “will pursue the particular strategy and the level of ethnic differentiation that she perceives to further her interests” (Wimmer 2013, 93). From this perspective, Wimmer has outlined a theoretical model of the various strategies available to actors, which this article aims to build upon. The theoretical model distinguishes between the following main strategies:

Strategies that attempt to change the location of existing boundaries (“boundary shifting”) by “expanding” or “contracting” the domains of the included and those that do not aim at the location of a boundary but try to modify its meaning and implication by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories (“normative inversion”), de-emphasizing ethnicity and emphasizing other social divisions (“blurring”), or changing one’s own position vis-à-vis the boundary (“positional moves”). (Wimmer 2008a, 1031; Wimmer 2013, 49)

This theoretical model can also be used to analyse immigrant integration processes. For example, immigrant integration processes into the majority

society can be interpreted as examples of ethnic boundary shifting (cf. Beier and Kroneberg 2013; Bakkær Simonsen 2016). However, in this article, the strategy of the *blurring* of ethnic boundaries is of particular relevance. Boundary blurring replaces ethnic divisions with other social markers. This strategy involves attempts by the actor to question the importance of ethnicity. If the strategy is successful, ethnic boundaries are “blurred” (rather than “bright”) in the sense that they are less important for everyday life, less exclusionary and less institutionalized (cf. Bauböck 1998; Alba 2005). The early literature on boundary blurring often discussed broader societal processes (e.g. Zolberg and Long 1999), while the focus of Wimmer is on the strategies of social actors. Ethnic blurring is a strategy in which non-ethnic identities and principles of social organization are promoted by the actor (Wimmer 2008a, 1041; Wimmer 2013, 61–63). The examples of the strategy of blurring provided by Wimmer (2013, 61–63) most commonly emphasize a local community, which involves an emphasis on local or regional identities. However, a strategy of blurring may also emphasize global communities of belonging, which may build on solidarity based on non-ethnic social class, universalizing religious discourse or shared ideas of human qualities. According to Wimmer, “general human qualities and the ‘family of mankind’ are often evoked, it seems, by the most excluded and stigmatized groups” (Wimmer 2013, 62). Obviously, groups situated in a subordinated position in ethnic hierarchies have an interest in questioning the existing social boundaries. Yet it is plausible to assume that members of privileged groups in some situations also have an interest in questioning the legitimacy and relevance of ethnic boundaries, such as in situations in which social class or some other principles of social organization may provide an advantage and be more compelling to the actor in question. The aim of this article is to provide new information on this type of strategic choices of privileged groups.

The research that has applied the analytical framework of Wimmer has mostly focused on the strategies of members of subordinated ethnic groups (e.g. Aramburu 2020; Çelik 2018; Collins, Laws and Ntakirutimana 2021; Kosta 2019; Serdar 2019). In cases of social inequality, ethnic boundaries have a tendency to display a high degree of closure and easily become politically salient (Wimmer 2008b). The strategies of subordinated minority groups involve issues of contestation and political struggles that can involve a broad range of boundary-making strategies. In contrast to the focus on subordinated groups, the ethnic boundary-making strategies of dominant groups often tend to remain unnoticed and unquestioned, although they may be highly consequential since they are promoted from a position of power. Wimmer’s framework has been used in some recent studies about relatively privileged individuals from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds, and the results of the studies indicate a variety of individual strategies of boundary making. A study by Kaisu Koskela (2021) of highly-skilled migrants in Finland describes a multi-ethnic, multi-

national group with racialized ethnicities who tend to employ diverse class-based strategies or express a wish to promote individual principles of social organization to avoid stigmatized racial ethnicities. Correspondingly, a study by Arnfinn Midtbøen (2018) explores when and under what conditions ethnicity and religious background shape minorities' experiences when participating in the public sphere in Norway. Drawing on in-depth interviews with elite individuals with various ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, he explicitly describes the existence of blurred ethnic boundaries, but finds it inconclusive if this is due to a sample of "exceptional individuals" or if the results point to broader, societal processes of boundary-blurring in Norway. In contrast to these two studies of privileged individuals coming from a diversity of national and ethnic backgrounds, this article is based on a sample of informants with a national and ethnic background that was as uniform as possible, which enables an analysis of ethnic boundary-making processes from a fixed viewpoint. This analysis will provide information on the strategies chosen by specific migrants that enter a social field, but also on how the social field in question shapes the strategies. Thus, to understand the analysis a brief contextualization is required.

Migration from Sweden to Finland

The social field in question relates to two neighbouring countries, Sweden and Finland, that have a shared history, which also includes extensive migration between the countries. Since the 1950s, the migration has predominantly consisted of labour migration from Finland to Sweden and partly of return migration to Finland. However, in the 2000s, there has been an increasing number of Swedish citizens moving to Finland. Although many of the contemporary Swedish migrants in Finland may have Finnish ancestry and some have lived in Finland previously, some of the new Swedish migrants do not have a previous connection to Finland. This study focuses on the local ethnic boundary-making strategies of this particular group of Swedish-speaking Swedish citizens with no previous personal connection to Finland. This focus on individuals that can be regarded as outsiders of a social field enables a focus on a key aspect of the ethnic boundary-making theory outlined by Wimmer, namely the processes involved when actors enter a social field and its pre-existing ethnic boundaries. These Swedish migrants enter a specific social context with specific ethnic boundaries connected to the Finnish and Swedish language groups of Finland, involving Finnish as a majority language and Swedish as a minority language. The migrants from Sweden have an experience of their native Swedish language as the self-evident majority language in Sweden, but they now have to navigate a social field where their native language is an ethnic marker of a local minority group.

Finnish and Swedish constitute two fundamentally different languages. In Finland, Swedish-speakers form an autochthonous linguistic minority, the Finland Swedes. This is an old national minority that predominantly inhabits specific geographical areas along the coast of Finland. Individual crossings of the language boundary, in both directions, do occur, but as Barth (1969) pointed out, ethnic boundaries can exist regardless of individuals crossing the boundary. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Finland Swedes have displayed a political and ethnic mobilization and a sense of groupness connected to their minority position (McRae 1997). The minority identity that Finland Swedes possess and the parallel linguistic institutional arrangements in Finland maintain an ethnic boundary within which native language is an ethnic marker, regardless of possible individual bi-lingualism and boundary crossing.

The ethnic relations of the two national language groups are also influenced by the history of the languages. Finland gained independence from Russia in 1917 but had been part of Sweden until 1809. Swedish was the dominant language of literature, administration and the upper class in Finland until the late nineteenth century, i.e. even when the country was an autonomous part of the Russian empire. The status of the Finnish language improved as part of the nationalist movement of the nineteenth century (Coleman 2010). The official status of Finnish and Swedish as equal national languages in Finland were part of the political solutions of the newly independent state (McRae 1997). Furthermore, the Swedish language is an important language in various contacts among all the Nordic countries, including important business relations of Finnish companies. Thus, language skills in Swedish and various cultural knowledge of Sweden may be highly valued in the Finnish labour market.

As migrants from a Nordic country, the informants in this study are in many ways in a more advantaged position than other migrants. The Nordic agreements in the 1950s on the freedom of movement, equal social rights and a common labour market have made it relatively easy to move from one Nordic country to another, and provides extensive social and political rights to Nordic citizens that other migrants do not enjoy. In public discourse, Nordic migrants are not necessarily perceived as “immigrants” (cf. Wickström 2017). The interviewees in this study can be considered “white” and would not be categorized according to racialized labels given to many other migrants in Finland. To be “a Swede” provides a good, but not necessarily unproblematic, position in local social hierarchies in Finland. Thus, in comparison to other migrants, Swedish migrants may generally be considered to be a relatively privileged group of migrants (cf. Lundström 2014).

The autochthonous Swedish-speaking minority has historically had a relatively strong economic and political position in Finnish society. Finland is also a Nordic welfare state typically characterized by equality, which would

suggest that ethnic boundaries have a low salience (Wimmer 2008b). However, the language question is politically salient in Finland. The social and political position of the Finland Swedes has changed over time and has been characterized by instability (McRae 1997, 2007). The members of the minority group of Finland Swedes, often consider themselves to be in a position in which their individual linguistic rights and their options for using their native language are threatened in Finland. The demographic position is challenging. According to the population register, only 5.2 per cent of the population in Finland indicates that Swedish was their native language. In Helsinki, the proportion of Swedish-speakers has steadily declined and today it is 5.6 per cent. In urban locations the pressure of Finnish as the majority language is obvious and the use of the Swedish language has largely been pushed from public into private spheres of life (Latoomaa and Nuolijärvi 2002). A minority position involves issues of both recognition and redistribution that are not automatically granted to the minority. The parallel linguistic solutions and institutions that the minority finds necessary for basic services and survival of the minority may in public debates among the majority be presented as privileges of the minority. The Finnish-speaking majority often find that the cultural rights of the minority are not in proportion to the small number of Swedish-speakers. For example, the extent that both national languages should be included in compulsory school teaching has been an issue of disagreements that frequently resurfaces in political debates in Finland.

Migrants who move to Finland are not necessarily aware of local history or contemporary ethnic relations. Over time and as part of integration processes migrants become forced to navigate the local social field. The receiving society may also situate migrants in specific positions in relation to the existing ethnic boundaries, regardless of how people would like to position themselves. Thus, the question this study aimed to answer is how Swedish migrants position themselves in relation to the local ethnic categories in Finland. Furthermore, the study also aimed to map the strategies of Swedish migrants concerning the local ethnic boundaries connected to the Swedish language. As Wimmer (2013) points out, individuals make strategic choices in relation to the existing ethnic boundaries and these choices are limited. Studying how choices are made provides information on both individual agency and structural constraints. From this analytical perspective, this case study contributes to theoretical academic discussions on ethnic boundary making.

Methods

This study applies an analytical perspective on ethnic boundary making that emphasizes a focus on the strategic choices of individual actors. The

strategies become more visible when the ethnic categories are not self-evident, and choices involve contestation and deliberations. This project has therefore focused on Swedish immigrants in Finland that explicitly did not identify themselves as Finns or Finnish citizens, thus focusing on informants who can be perceived as not originally being part of the local ethnic relations. As an immigrant, you enter a pre-existing social field with existing ethnic boundaries and social hierarchies, which you need to navigate to position yourself strategically in the field. The focus of the analysis is on the actor's own interpretations and explanations of their strategies of ethnic boundary making, i.e. the "categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves" (Barth 1969, 10). With this aim in mind, semi-structured interviews were employed as the method.

The article is based on results from interviews with 16 Swedish migrants in Helsinki. The interviewees were found as part of a larger research project on the migration from Finland to Sweden in the 2010s (Wahlbeck 2015; Wahlbeck and Fortelius 2019). This article focuses on the results of interviews concerning ethnic boundary-making processes with a specific sample of Swedish migrants. The sample comprised adult Swedish-speaking Swedish citizens living in Helsinki, which is the main destination for recent migrants. The interviewees were aged between 20 and 55, had lived permanently in Finland for at least five years, but were not Finnish citizens, did not have Finnish parents, were not born in Finland, and did not identify themselves as Finns (*finsk*) or Finnish (*finländare*). Interviewees complying with this specific sample criteria were found through informal channels in various Swedish-language institutions in Helsinki combined with snowball sampling. Many of the interviewees in the final sample were employed in workplaces in which their Swedish background was considered to be an asset. Examples of such workplaces include Swedish-language daycare for children, schools, university departments, care units for Swedish-speaking elderly people, cultural institutions, and some Swedish-owned companies, especially in the financial sector. Thus, the interviewees can be considered skilled migrants with a relatively good position in the labour market.

During the research process, several interviewees had to be omitted from the final sample, since it turned out that they had a previous connection to Finland, e.g. a parent who had previously lived in Finland. The final sample of interviewees included seven men and nine women. In a Swedish context, all the interviewees would probably be considered members of a Swedish ethnic majority, i.e. they would not be considered non-white or "immigrants" in Sweden. The significant explanation for the migration was that the Swedes had moved to Finland with, or because of, a Finnish partner. Mixed families consisting of Finnish and Swedish citizens are common in both countries, and 11 of the interviewees had a Finnish partner, or had previously had one (which included both Swedish-speakers

and Finnish-speakers). Nonetheless, about half of the interviewees had originally arrived as single young migrants with the initial intention of staying for a short period of time, but ending up staying for a longer time, which is similar to the migration trajectories found among Swedish migrants in other countries (Lundström 2014).

The interviews were conducted in the Swedish language and the length was between one and three hours. All the interviews were fully transcribed. A comprehensive analysis of the transcriptions was facilitated by using a computer program for qualitative analysis guided by the methodology of grounded theory. The quotations from the interviews cited in this article were translated to English by the author.

Categories of ascription and identification

The subsequent sections of this article will present the strategies of the interviewed Swedish migrants in Helsinki. As part of the semi-structured interviews, detailed questions were asked about ethnic identification and boundary-making strategies. Questions about the ethnic and national self-identification of the interviewees were open-ended, but labels on ethnic, national and linguistic groups commonly used in public discourse were suggested to the interviewees. Partly, a purpose of this was to control that the interviewees were not Finnish, since the aim was to find a sample of interviewees who could be regarded as being outsiders entering a new social field. All interviewees included in the final sample found it easy to indicate that they were not “Finns” or “Finnish”. The reasons that they mentioned for this was that to some degree they felt they were foreigners in Finland, having spent their formative years in another country and they had not fully mastered the Finnish language. Furthermore, the interviewees also wished to avoid the “Finland Swedes” (*finlandssvensk*) label. None of the interviewees found themselves to be “Finland Swedes” and most also found that they would probably never become that. This was often explained by a reference to the “roots” they had in Sweden and did not have in Finland. Thus, the interviewees did not identify with the labels that were used to describe the local Swedish-speaking minority community, despite sharing the same language.

As boundary-making theory would suggest, most found it easy to identify ethnic labels they would *not* use to describe themselves. However, the interviewees also found it hard to identify with any term suggested by the interviewer, and they were also reluctant to name any other ethnic or national label to describe themselves. Many gave lengthy explanations why they strongly would prefer not to use any national, ethnic or linguistic category whatsoever to describe themselves. Most interviewees found that, if pressed to provide an answer, they would prefer to use the expression

“from Sweden” rather than to identify themselves as a Swede or Swedish (*svensk*). As a female interviewee in her 40s explained: “I do not find it of interest, the nationality in that sense. If somebody asks, I can tell them where I come from, but I would not like ‘Hi, my name is [...] and I am a Swede’. I would not do that” (P3).

Many of the interviewees explained that it was only in Finland that they had been forced to relate to their Swedish national belonging and to choose an ethnic identification. When the interviewees had lived in Sweden, they had belonged to the ethnic majority which is not used to being defined in cultural, ethnic or national terms. In contrast, as migrants in a new country, you are no longer a member of self-evident majority, this forces you to think about your own national and ethnic identity. Obviously, as classical boundary-making theories suggest, it is only in relation to other ethnic groups and categories that your own ethnicity becomes visible and meaningful (Barth 1969; Wimmer 2013). However, the experiences of the interviewees seemed to go beyond the normal processes of boundary making among migrants, since the interviewees also felt that they were given new roles and labels in Finland that they were not used to. A man in his late 30s answered: “Well, I can be a “Sweden Swede” [*rikssvensk*] or “Swedish” [*svensk*], it does not really matter to me, but here in Finland it is, it seems to be especially here in Finland, that for some reason people find this to be very important. People say ‘oh, you are a Sweden Swede’ Well, ok, I can be that” (P16)

To become “a Swede” with all that it may involve in a Finnish context, seemed to be the outcome of boundary-making processes of the social field that the migrants had entered and did not fully control. Thus, the interviewees often expressed an ambivalence about how to relate to the ethnic labels and collective identifications that they were offered in Finland. In everyday interaction a Swedish accent and lack of a good knowledge of Finnish were often sufficient to label them as “Swedes”, even if it may be difficult to visibly distinguish Finnish and Swedish nationals from each other. Although the interviewees were recognized as Swedish nationals, they still felt it unfamiliar and uncomfortable to identify themselves using ethnic or national labels. The interviewees often explained that they would have preferred to see themselves as individuals rather than to become identified as a member of any ethnic or national group.

Thus, the answers provided by the Swedish migrants reflected a wish to blur the importance of the ethnic and national collective belonging that they were offered in a Finnish context. The interviewees often explained that they wished to emphasize the importance of individual human qualities, since they wanted to avoid differentiation among people according to ethnic or national categories. For example, an interviewee explained that “what is important is who you are, not where you come from” (P15). An emphasis

on general human qualities rather than collective belonging is clearly an aspect of the strategy of blurring as outlined by Wimmer (2013, 62). Furthermore, rather than national belonging, several of the interviewees expressed a local belonging. Those who had lived for a longer period in Helsinki had a strong connection to the city and the local social connections they had established in this city. For example, a 36-year-old woman explained that “it was not Finland I returned to, it was Helsinki, since outside [the city centre] I am kind of lost. So, it is very much Helsinki, which I think is a really sympathetic city” (P41). This emphasis on a local rather than a national belonging can also be interpreted as an aspect of the strategy of blurring (Wimmer 2013, 61–63).

Ethnic boundary making in everyday situations

Ethnic boundary theory implies not only a categorical differentiation between “us” and “them”, but also a behavioural dimension that guides strategic action (Wimmer 2013). Identity claims are only one aspect of ethnic boundary making and choices actors make in situations of social interaction can reveal more about the ethnic boundaries (cf. Barth 1969; Li 2016). Thus, the interviews also involved questions on everyday ethnic networking strategies and social ties within and across ethnic boundaries. The interviews clearly, and somewhat surprisingly, gave the picture that social ties within the migrant group were relatively weak and limited. For example, very few of the Swedish migrants were active in the Swedish associations in Finland. During this study, the only active organization was *Svenska Gillet*, a well-established association in Helsinki with a history stretching back to the nineteenth century. The association did not have more than about 200 members, including many second-generation Swedes. The active members told me that it was difficult to recruit new members and to get in touch with recent arrivals from Sweden. This relatively low number of organizations and collective activities that would gather Swedish migrants together may seem surprising and is in contrast to other migrant groups in Finland that often establish local organizations. When asked about the limited activity in organizations, the interviewees explained that there was no need for it. The interviewees’ experience was not that they would need help or advice from other Swedish citizens. Furthermore, there was no need to start any separate activities in the Swedish language, since activities in Swedish already were broadly offered by the local Swedish-speaking minority and its well-established institutions.

Thus, many of the Swedish migrants become socially integrated into the activities and organizations of the local minority of Finland Swedes. This social integration into the networks of the local minority group was also supported by the fact that many had spouses, partners or colleagues who were

Finland Swedes. Thus, rather than establishing a community of Swedish nationals in Helsinki, the migrants became part of the social networks of the minority group relatively easily and rapidly. The interviews clearly indicated that a local spouse often played a decisive role in local networking practices. Especially among those interviewees that lived in a family with Finland Swedes, everyday life became deeply embedded in various social relations of the well-established local community of the Finland Swedes.

Thus, in everyday interaction most of the interviewees had close contacts with the Finland Swedes, while the contacts with fellow Swedish nationals could be more limited. Consequently, a key question is how the migrants from Sweden relate to the local ethnic boundary defined by the Swedish language, which constitutes the ethnic marker that defines the minority group of Finland Swedes. The interviewees were well aware of the social boundary between the two national language groups in Finland, but still the interviewees claimed that they were not part of this dichotomy. Some of the interviewees explained that they understood that members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland could or had a wish to categorize them as members of the minority, but still found it difficult to see themselves as members of this group.

The results indicate that the Swedish migrants generally promoted a strategy of blurring of ethnic boundaries. However, this also depended on the situation and there were exceptions to the general avoidance of expressions of national belonging. The interviewees were explicitly asked to describe everyday situations in which they wanted to emphasize a Swedish belonging. The interviewees explained that there could be some situations of everyday social interaction in which they felt a need to emphasize that they came from Sweden. Interestingly, most often this involved situations in which they did not want to be identified as Finland Swedes. The interviewees felt that there were situations in which they needed to explain why they had limited knowledge of Finnish or spoke it badly, and they did not want to be categorized as members of the local Swedish-speaking minority, who the Finnish-speaking majority may expect to speak Finnish in public situations. Some of the interviewees explained that they did not want to be seen as a member of the Swedish-speaking minority that demands services in the Swedish language. In many situations, the interviewees chose to use English as a means of communication, which is widely understood in Helsinki. In any case, the interviewees did not want to be perceived as individuals who demand linguistic rights for the Swedish language in Finland. The stereotype of the demanding Finland Swedes can be a negative stereotype in the majority discourse in Helsinki. Thus, it occasionally became necessary in everyday situations to state clearly that the reason why they spoke Swedish, or bad Finnish, was that came from Sweden and that they were not Finland Swedes. Thus, the interviewees practised a strategy of ethnic

boundary making that would keep them outside the relations between the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish-speaking majority in Finland. These boundary-making strategies were vividly described by an informant who occasionally felt a need to provide an excuse for not being fluent in Finnish:

Well, I emphasise that I am a Swede in contacts with the Finnish-speakers. Because I want to avoid this negative attitude towards Finland Swedes that many Finnish-speakers hold. I think I end up in special sidetrack if I emphasise that I am a Swede. Because many of them like Sweden a lot. So, that is when I emphasise that I am a Swede. I emphasise that I am a Swede at work [...] as an example that you [...] can move as a Swede to Finland and feel happy [*trivas*], because it is a marvellous society. [...] And also in health care and the like - I am bad at Finnish - and in those situations I do not want them to think that I am a Finland Swede who has not learnt Finnish. [...] instead I try to say, I am a Swede, and know very little Finnish. And somehow, I think they, in that situation, I avoid this whole political discussion. In that case we do not have to be like "you should not come and make demands". Because that is the way it is, there is quite a lot of that. So, in those situations I am like a foreigner. (P13)

The quotation above describes a wish to present oneself as a Swede in interaction with members of the Finnish-speaking majority in Finland. Many interviewees felt that they would be more positively treated as a Swede than as a Finland Swede. Their lack of knowledge of Finnish would be excused and many had experienced that the Finnish-speakers became much more inclined to use their limited knowledge of Swedish when they knew that they spoke to a person from Sweden rather than to a Finland Swede. Some of the interviewees explicitly mentioned that they in many situations emphasized their national background to be able to avoid the prejudice and negative opinions that Finland Swedes might face in the same situation. Thus, in everyday interaction there could be many advantages in being identified as "a Swede" rather than a Finland Swede.

As mentioned previously, there are studies of privileged groups that have identified strategies of boundary making promoting class-based rather than ethnic principles of social organization (Midtbøen 2018; Koskela 2021). Of course, resourceful individuals who are well-positioned in social hierarchies do not receive much additional benefit from stressing ethnic collective belonging, since they are already in a privileged position. Furthermore, a relatively advantageous position in ethnic hierarchies also explains why there is no need for strategies that attempt to change the location of existing boundaries, to challenge the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories or to change one's own position vis-à-vis the boundary (cf. Wimmer 2013, 49). However, the results of this study suggest that blurring as a predominant strategic choice of the Swedish migrants can largely be explained by the ambiguity they feel about the local ethnic boundaries. As Beier and Kroneberg (2013)

point out, it may not only be the strength of an ethnic boundary that influences how migrants perceive it, the contested character of a boundary may also negatively influence migrants. Among the Swedish migrants, a strategy of blurring reflects a lack of other available strategies in a social field that they have found to be hard to navigate. Thus, to understand this we need to look more closely at why the social field was difficult to navigate.

The “language issue” in Finland

The difficulty that the interviewees experienced in navigating the social field had to do with the complexities of what is referred to as “the language issue” in Finland. As briefly outlined at the beginning of this article, the language question in Finland has been characterized by demographic, linguistic and political changes that creates a relative “instability” in the relation between the language groups (McRae 2007). The interviewees explicitly referred to the “language issue” as a difficult question that they experienced ambivalence about. On one hand, they found that the whole debate about the status and position of the Swedish language in Finland did not concern them personally, they felt they were outsiders, and it should be an issue for the Finns to settle. On the other hand, they also realized that this position probably was not fully sustainable, since the issue also involved the option for people from the other Nordic countries, including themselves, to communicate and get services in Swedish in Finland. Furthermore, most Swedes had extensive and close social contacts, including family members and colleagues that belonged to the Swedish-speaking minority that was the object and victims of the language debate. The ambivalence that the interviewees may feel in relation to the language debates in Finland was vividly described in the following discussion at the end of an interview:

ÖW: Is there anything you would like to add, or any question you think I should have asked??

I: I think there is one question that often pops up, it is ... or how you as a Swede can relate to this requirement, or language question, or what you call it. Like the conflict. That you have the right to speak Swedish with authorities, and should there be Swedish language teaching in schools or not. All the anger that there is concerning this on both sides. I think it is slightly tricky. Because I should be loyal towards the Finland Swedes and support it. Try to support it in practice. At the same time, I think that I am not a Finland Swede, I am kind of not a citizen of this country, I would like to stay outside of this.

ÖW: Ok, so it is not like, in that sense important, or?

I: No, I do not know. I *do not know*. I think it is tricky. It may be slightly cowardly of me, but I use to say that I do not take a position. But then, at the same time, I feel that I betray my friends who are Finland Swedes. And I take advantage of the struggle, if it can be called so, that is taking place, because my children get access to Swedish language schools and day

care. That is something they would not get if the policy would not be in place. And at the same time I cowardly emphasise that I do not make any demands. But I do think, honestly, that if I have migrated to another country, I cannot demand that people should speak my language. It is only a lucky coincidence that I happened to move to a country where there is a large group of people speaking my language. At the same time, I get angry when I go to [a public authority] and they cannot give you service in the Swedish language, because they completely ignore it. That [language] law is a joke for sure. And then I get angry when so many Finland Swedes do not realise that that law is a joke. They take it in good rest. If that is the case, I think the law should be abolished in that case. Well, this, I think, is a tricky area. I think I end up in a strange position. I do not know how to relate to this. (P12)

The ambiguous positioning and ambivalence in relation to the politically loaded language question in Finland was raised in various way in several of the interviews. The interviewees could give extensive descriptions of their experiences concerning the local debates on these issues and how they had experienced both Finnish and Swedish speakers having strong opinions. Some of the interviewees even expressed annoyance with the fact that people in Finland often wanted to raise language issues with them although they felt that they were not part of the whole question. The interviewees felt that they would like to stay away from the inflammable debate concerning the Swedish language and did not want to have an opinion, yet to not have an opinion was not felt fully satisfactory either.

As described in the quotations above, the local language policies and minority strategies were not easy to navigate and the interviewees were reluctant to take part in the debate on these issues. In relation to political issues concerning language rights in Finland the interviewees wanted to emphasize that they were outsiders and the interpretations they made on these issues were often described as individual rather than representing any collective group position. Even if the individual benefits of maintenance of the Swedish language in Finland were acknowledged, an explicit positioning or an activism relating to the issue was not found among the interviewees. To understand this positioning, it may be of relevance that the interviewees belonged to the ethnic majority in Sweden. Issues relating to minority rights may be sensitive political issues in both Finland and Sweden, and these issues are not limited to the position of the Finland Swedes in Finland. For example, there is also a sizeable minority of Finnish-speakers living in Sweden and language rights of Finnish-speakers in Sweden have been a political issue in Sweden for a long time. Because of the complexities of contested national histories, group boundaries and collective identities, a strategy of ethnic boundary blurring provided the migrants with an opportunity to avoid getting caught in a position associated with politically loaded issues, including minority claims and identity politics.

Thus, ethnicity was not preferred as a principle of categorization among the interviewees, instead, they supported a strategy of blurring, whereby they wished to question the relevance of ethnic and national boundaries. The interviewees found that they did not fit into any of the local ethnic categories. The remaining identity was to be “a Swede”, a national identity that the interviewees were reluctant about, but it had the advantage that it positioned the interviewees as outside of the local ethnic boundaries of the two language groups in Finland. A key aspect of the ethnic positioning is the fact that the interviewees are migrants. Although they in many respects are privileged migrants and are very well integrated in Finnish society, they are still migrants that have entered a new social field and they partly wish to see themselves as outsiders of this field.

Limits of the strategy of blurring

As mentioned above, Wimmer (2013) emphasizes the strategic choices made by individuals in relation to the existing social structures. Thus, the strategy of boundary blurring also depends on the extent to which it is accepted or questioned by the other actors in the social field in which it is promoted. According to a Bourdieusian field theory perspective, the habitus of individual actors is relatively stable, but strategies are not sustained when they no longer serve a purpose for the actor (Bourdieu 1984). Transposed to the case under study, the question becomes to what extent it is possible for migrants from Sweden to sustain a strategy of blurring and to remain outsiders in relation to the local boundaries of the two language groups in Finland.

There are some features of the political and administrative organization of the bilingualism of Finland that place limits on the strategy of blurring. There are situations in which a language choice is compulsory, which also has practical consequences for group belonging. These choices involve both personal choices and choices that parents have to make for their children. The first language choice to be made concerns the population register in Finland, in which all permanent residents have to indicate one language, and only one, as their native language. This language can be freely chosen, but a choice of one is compulsory. The information is needed for the implementation of the Finnish language laws, e.g. the official language status and service provisions of municipalities depends on the number of Finnish and Swedish speakers. In families with children, an important choice has to be made when children start to attend daycare and school. The daycare and school system, and partly also university education, is divided into two parallel institutional systems in the two national languages. The choice is free, but for practical reasons most pupils and students remain in either system throughout their education. This choice also has decisive consequences for language identity and sense of group belonging of the children (cf. Palviainen

and Bergroth 2018). In practice, there is a strong tendency that Finnish and Swedish bilingual families in Finland choose the Swedish-language school system, which has been explained by the instrumental benefits of this choice (Finnäs and O'Leary 2003). There have been no studies on the choices made by Swedish citizens in Finland; however, among the seven interviewees that had children in this study, all had chosen daycare or schools in the Swedish language and explained that this had been the best practical solution.

The interviews revealed that the parents clearly were aware of and accepted that the language choices had consequences for the group belonging of their children. Although the interviewees often expressed a positioning as outsiders in Finland, they did not extend this positioning to their children. For example, one parent explained: "Without thinking too much about it, I think I have started to regard [my child] as a Finland Swede. I think that is ok. It is ok that he has a sense of affinity [*samhörighet*]. Because he has not grown up in Sweden". (P12). Another parent expressed the view that it is "obvious" [*inget snack om saken*] that his children were Finland Swedes, because "that is the identity they will get as bi-lingual Finland Swedes in Finland, and I have no problem with that" (P42). Generally, the interviewees wanted to provide as many opportunities as possible to their children, without limitations relating to linguistic, ethnic and national belonging. Still, the interviewees realized that their children would become part of a bilingual Finnish society. In situations when a choice had to be made between the two language groups, the choice was to affiliate the children with the Swedish minority group. To put it simply, although the interviewees felt that they were not Finland Swedes, they felt that their children probably would become Finland Swedes.

The language choice that has to be made concerning children exemplifies that there may be limits to a strategy of blurring of ethnic boundaries. Ultimately, the monolingual ethnic and linguistic categories demanded by public administrative bureaucracy may force actors to make a choice. As Wimmer (2013) point out, the ethnic categories available on the social field in question may be limited and there may be institutional incentives for the choice of strategies. A case in point are census and population register categories that demand definitive choices by the actor. Regardless of the intentions of the actor, these categories and the support they get may be used in political struggles concerning recognition and redistribution among groups. For example, the number of officially registered Swedish-speakers in a Finnish municipality will have direct consequences for the availability of public services in the Swedish language. The interviews indicate that those Swedish migrants that had lived for a longer period in Finland expressed stronger support for the minority strategies of the Finland Swedes. Those with a Swedish-speaking Finnish partner were socially

integrated into the minority group relatively rapidly and in the interviews they more often than other interviewees expressed a need for active support of the minority language.

Conclusion

This study has focused on sample of Swedish-speaking Swedish migrants in Helsinki. Building on the theoretical model outlined by Wimmer (2013), the study analyses the strategy the migrants promoted concerning ethnic boundary making. The migrants have moved to Finland where they have to navigate a new social field involving Swedish as a minority language that serves as an ethnic marker of the local minority community of Finland Swedes. Thus, it may even be that many Finland Swedes assume that all Swedish-speakers in Finland share (or at least should share) a collective identity as members of the language minority. The migrants were relatively extensively socially integrated into the local social networks of this minority, but did not position themselves as members of the minority. They found it difficult to fit into the ethnic category of Finland Swedes and its associated minority identity. Instead, the migrants promoted a strategy of blurring of ethnic boundaries, in which the actors wish to question the importance of ethnicity. The migrants were resourceful individuals and wanted to avoid being associated with collective ethnic or national labels. They felt they were outsiders in relation to the politically and often emotionally loaded debates on the “language issue” in Finland. The local language policies were regarded as complicated issues that the interviewees felt they should not have an opinion on. The migrants already had a relatively good position in the social hierarchies of Finnish society, as relatively privileged migrants, and they would not have had much to gain from promoting group belonging in relation to the local ethnic boundaries. However, this strategy led to a relatively ambiguous positioning in relation to the local Swedish-speaking minority, which many Swedish migrants were socially integrated into relatively rapidly.

The strategy of ethnic boundary making of the Swedish migrants in Helsinki clearly corresponds to what Wimmer (2013) defines as a strategy of boundary blurring. However, according to Wimmer (2013, 62) this strategy is characteristic of the most excluded and stigmatized groups, which the group under study is clearly not. Swedish migrants in Helsinki generally constitute a resourceful and privileged group of migrants. Thus, the results of this study clearly indicate that resourceful actors may also choose to promote a strategy of blurring. In situations in which the ethnic boundaries are found to be limiting or challenging to navigate, resourceful actors may choose to avoid being identified by ethnic categories, since the benefits and advantages of ethnic group belonging are not obvious. The results support the

argument that the degree of contestedness of ethnic boundaries, not only the strength of boundaries influence migrants (Beier and Kroneberg 2013). When ethnic relations involve contested systems of social hierarchies, the actor may find that risks are involved in the positions on the social field. Thus, resourceful individuals may find that it is a safer choice to emphasize individual characteristics or some other nonethnic principle of social organization. Yet, whether these resourceful actors are “exceptional individuals” or whether their strategy reflects broader societal processes of blurring often remains an open question (cf. Midtbøen 2018). The results from this study reveal that social categorizations promoted by the Finnish school systems and demanded by public administration may ultimately force actors to choose among ethnic categories and constitute limits to an individual strategy of blurring of categories. Thus, societal structures may set limits on the agency of resourceful individuals and their wish to promote a strategy of blurring.

Note

1. In English, the autochthonous Swedish-speaking minority in Finland is today often referred to as the “Swedish-speaking Finns”, which reflects the national identity of the group. Yet, this article, which relies on interview data, uses the equally common term “Finland Swedes” since it is a more exact translation of the term used in Swedish (*finlandssvenskar*).

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