



EERIKA KOSKINEN-KOIVISTO

Her Own Worth

*Negotiations of Subjectivity in the Life Narrative
of a Female Labourer*

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P.O. Box 259

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Preface

This book is based on my PhD research. During the research process I learned a lot from the experienced masters craftsmen of different “factories and units” and received help from many fellow workers.

From our first meeting, I have admired the energy and enthusiasm for conducting research of my supervisor Laura Stark. She has worked tremendously to support her students in finding research funding and always has had time to discuss and advise us on the path to becoming researchers. In the context of mentoring, she has involved me in her research projects and has urged me to go abroad. I have learned a lot from her, and want to thank her for her help and support. I would also like to thank my other supervisor, PhD Saara Tuomaala-Sarpong, for her encouraging and constructive comments concerning my texts through the entire process. When we first met, she and I were strangers, but she took her role seriously and remained a constant help despite everything that life brought along. Your support and trust were of crucial importance to me. Thank you.

I wish to particularly thank the reviewers Professor Ulf Palmenfelt and Docent Teemu Taira for their thorough and constructive evaluations. I met Ulf in 2007 at the first international conference I ever attended. Prof. Palmenfelt’s work on narrators and narration has inspired me a great deal. I was honored to be able to end this process with his evaluation. While writing my Master’s thesis, I heard a lecture by Teemu Taira on autobiographies and was impressed. I am honored that he agreed to act as my opponent at the defense and thank him for his remarks and for the challenging and enlightening discussion.

Docent and lecturer Pertti Anttonen helped me especially at the beginning of my research process. He encouraged critical thinking and took seriously the attempts of a young doctoral student to discuss theoretical issues. Pertti also gave me comments which helped me rework the manuscript after the defense. I take this opportunity to express my thanks to him.

During my PhD studies, I was a member of the research project *Strategic Practices: Hidden Histories of Gender in Finland 1880–2005*. In addition to my supervisor Laura Stark, the leader of the project, and my other supervisor Saara Tuomaala-Sarpong, I wish to thank Docent Marja Kokko, PhD Pasi Saarimäki, PhD Arja Turunen and Phil.Lic. Heli Niskanen for their inspiring thoughts and collegial support. I would also like to thank Professor

Hanna Snellman, the director of the project *Happy Days? – Everyday Life and Nostalgia in the Extended 1950s* (SA 137923) in the context of which I began my postdoctoral research, and which made it possible to revise this manuscript. The co-operation with all of the members of the Happy Days network has been a pleasure. Thanks go to Lena Marander-Eklund, Simo Laakkonen, Leena Paaskoski, Arja Turunen, Laura Hirvi, Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, Keijo Rantanen, Tytti Steel and Antti Wallius as well as Kalle Kallio and Teemu Ahola from Werstas and Iina Wahlström from Sarka.

In addition to project groups, I had the privilege of being a member of the Graduate School of Cultural Interpretations, a joint graduate school of folklore and religious studies. I am grateful to the directors and coordinators of the graduate school for the well-organized program, and to all the friends and fellow graduate students who gave critical comments, pushed my work ahead, and provided joyful evening gatherings.

Further, I want to express warm thanks to my own working community, the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä, whose staff and students have been an inspiring group to work with. Special thanks to the director, Professor Jari Ojala, for creating an excellent working environment. I also want to thank Professor Pirjo Korkiakangas for leading the doctoral seminar of ethnology, and all the participants of the doctoral seminars as well as those of the annual seminar of the department for their comments that helped me to improve my work. In addition, I greatly benefitted from the meetings and discussions of our gender studies research cluster led by Professors Pirjo Markkola and Tiina Kinnunen. And I wish to thank my closest colleagues who have also become dear friends in sharing with me both the joys and worries of life. Thank you Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, Laura Hirvi, Pilvi Hämeenaho and Arja Turunen.

I also need to send thanks to the other side of the Atlantic. In 2009–2010 I spent a year as a Fulbright grantee in the Center for Folklore Studies at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. That year was significant in many ways. I am grateful to Professor Dorothy Noyes for her invitation to visit the Center and to Professors Amy Shuman, Katherine Borland, Sabra Webber, Ray Cashman and Patrick B. Mullen for their time and insightful comments to my texts. I also wish to thank Barbara and Timothy Lloyd for introducing me to the American folklore community and for offering me their friendship and support. During my stay in Columbus, I also enjoyed the wonderful company of many fellow graduate students.

Research also requires financial support. I wish to thank all the institutions who have funded my research: the Ellen and Artturi Nyyssönen Fund, the Graduate School of Cultural Interpretations, the Finnish Academy, the Fulbright Center, the Eino Jutikkala Fund, Palkansaajasäätiö, the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the Emil ja Lempi Hietanen Fund, and the Faculty of Humanities as well as the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä. I would also like to thank Gerard McAlester and Joan Nordlund for proofreading the parts of this manuscript. I would like to thank *Ethnologia Scandinavica* for the permission to use parts of my article “Disappearing Landscapes. Embodied Experience and Metaphoric

Space in the Life Story of a Female Factory Worker” published in volume 41 in Chapter 5 of this book. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

This text took its final form thanks to the insightful comments of two anonymous reviewers. I am also grateful to the editor of this series, Professor Katriina Siivonen, for her help and to Maija Hakala and Eija Hukka from the Finnish Literature Society’s publishing department for all the instructions and co-ordination. Thank you for your collaboration.

At this point, I would also like to thank friends who helped me while I commuted back and forth between Riihimäki and Jyväskylä: Riikka Aro, Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, Arja and Olli Turunen. I am very grateful also to those who have supported me sharing happy and dark moments of life. Thank you Essi and Tamás Gruborovics, Essi Ikonen, Sini-Mari and Antti Lepistö, Tiina and Timo Piispanen and Pauliina Tujula. My family, on their part, has offered me moments during which I could forget my research work. A special thanks is owed to my father Asko for helping me to gather information on the Inha Ironworks and on Elsa’s life. And last but not least, there are no words that could express my gratitude towards my husband Ilja who has followed me to other side of the world because of this work, has read numerous versions of my text, listened to my worries and ideas, and stayed by my side during the difficult times. Thank you for believing in me!

And finally, this research would not have been possible without my grandmother Elsa Koskinen, who shared with me her life narrative. Not everyone has the privilege to know a grandparent so well as a human being. I wish to dedicate this work to her.

Madison October 30th, 2014

Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto

1. Introduction

Understanding Her Life

I worked. I said I have greasy skin. I am a greasy-skinned worker.
Let others study. But I have done OK. (Interview 10, 9, p.8)

Research Aims and Questions

The world has changed tremendously over the past century. Science and technology have taken huge steps, human mobility has increased in scale and speed, and market economics has taken over most of the globe. Finnish society is totally different from what it was a hundred years ago: the everyday life of regular Finns is rather secure and financially comfortable; most citizens live in urban areas and have access to high education. It is even said that Finns form one big middle class. This is, of course, a generalization like any shared narrative of social change. It excludes controversies, struggle, and tragedies that narratives of personal experiences could reveal. What would individual people have to say about life in the 20th century? What kind of story would you tell about your life to a representative of the younger generation? What aspects of life would you emphasize and what accounts would you narrate?

In this study, I examine the life narrative of a female worker who also happens to be my grandmother, Elsa Sanelma Koskinen (née Kiiikkala). I analyze her account of her experiences related to work, class and gender because I seek to gain a better understanding of how changes in these aspects of life influenced the ways in which she saw her own worth at the time of the interviews, and constructed her subjectivity. I am also interested in the power dynamics in modernizing Finland: social norms and values, intersecting identities and varying social positions that limit individual choices but at the same time are constantly renegotiated in shifting social situations. A life narrative, which consists of several smaller narratives, offers views on both of these dimensions: the process of individual meaning making and the power of social norms and ideals.

I chose to study Elsa¹ for a number of reasons. First, early on she expressed a willingness to share her experiences with me. Trust, mutual understanding and the depth of our many years of interaction allowed her to open up to me, the interviewer, on sensitive topics such as social hierarchy, her family life and her sense of shame and dignity.² In addition, Elsa's life touches upon many of the core aspects of 20th-century social change: changes in women's roles, the entrance of middle-class women into working life, women's increasing participation in the public sphere, feminist movements, upward social mobility, the expansion of the middle class, the growth of welfare

and the appearance of new technologies not only in industrial working life but also in daily life: the kitchen, the laundry room and the hospital. These complex constellations of socio-economic transformation have been designated “the process of modernization” (Felski 1995, 12–13). During the course of modernization in Finland, the number of narratives entering people’s lives expanded via newspapers, literature, schoolbooks, popular culture, and plays performed by civic groups and in school galas (Stark 2006a, 11–14, 17). Reading, writing, social movements and education encouraged modern citizens to reflect upon their own encounters with material novelties, new technologies, novel ideologies, developments and social changes. Many interesting experiences of encounters with these innovations are recounted in life stories of 20th-century Europeans. Individual life stories such as Elsa Koskinen’s offer hundreds of smaller narratives for analysis.

This study takes an ethnographic approach to life narrative and applies dialogic methodology both in the interview method and in the analysis of the interview material. The folklorist Patricia Sawin (2004), who has examined the songs and life of female Appalachian singer and storyteller Bessie Eldreth (born in the 1910s), provides us with a brilliant example of this kind of ethnographic analysis. Eldreth had been interviewed and taped several times before Sawin started to collect oral traditions from her. At first, Sawin did not expect to find herself engaged in the project of studying Eldreth and her self-representation. Sawin’s aim was simply to study Eldreth’s songs and singing practice. During the research process, Sawin ended up using dialogic methodology. Hearing more and more about Eldreth’s life and listening to her multi-vocal stories, Sawin became interested in Eldreth’s creation of a gender- and class-determined sense of self. Eldreth, who grew up in rural Appalachia, supported her family (a husband and eleven children) by doing various, often physical, jobs such as farm work, cutting timber, cleaning and cooking. Eldreth constructs her subjectivity mostly around labour and gender. In her study, Sawin considers how Bessie Eldreth positions herself in relation to internalized societal discourses. Describing her research process and methodology, she uses the term *the ethnography of subjectivity* and explains:

“My approach thus challenges the assumptions that underpin biography or life history, in that biography treats the subject as self-evidently significant, life history presents the subjective as representative of a group and both not only accept the subject as performed and self-consistent but also obscure the process whereby various bits of information drawn from multiple sources and originally inflected by multiple voices are melded into ‘the story’ of a person’s life. *The ethnography of subjectivity*, in contrast, locates significance in exposing the process through which the subject creates herself through interaction and in interrogating the traces from which we can track that process.” (Sawin 2004, 2; Emphasis E.K-K.)

The subject and aim of this study are parallel to Sawin’s: to study the life story of one woman who is a skilled narrator, who has performed hard physical

labour and who had situated herself as belonging to a lower rank in her social hierarchy. Sawin's intention to respect the informant and their relationship and her desire to seek a profound understanding of the other person are similar to my own, and called for a dialogic approach³.

My interest in life narratives and the folklore of worker communities began at an early stage of my academic studies, when I started writing my Master's thesis. My focus in this thesis (2005) was on Elsa's life-story narration, her repertoire of narratives and her world view. In order to collect material for the thesis I interviewed Elsa repeatedly during the years 2001–2004. In all, I conducted 12 interviews with her, although in my Master's thesis I analyzed only nine of these interviews. This study includes all 12 interviews (about 12 hours of audiotape). The issues I analyze here – gender, class and work – were prominent in the interviews, which together form Elsa's life story as she chose to tell it to me. During the interview process, Elsa told me about her life at the Inha Ironworks (*Ruukki*, as she still calls it).⁴ In the course of her life and working career, Elsa witnessed the heyday of the ironworks, when a traditional patriarchal style of management predominated in the metal industry. She lived through the transformation undergone by the factory community and its production due to the emergence of new technologies and modern practices of automation, increased supervision and the ever-spreading power of the market economy.⁵ Elsa also experienced changes in women's role in society, and enjoyed a degree of social mobility and a dramatic improvement in her standard of living after the Second World War. It is important to note that these changes were neither unique nor did they merely signify the disappearance of old values and traditions. It is also worth pointing out that traditional patriarchal industrial communities such as the Inha Ironworks were not static and harmonious communities. On the contrary, industrial communities have always existed in a process of transformation, development and uncertainty, depending on the economic situation and technological development (see Ahvenisto 2008; Kortelainen 2008, 25).

However, change is perceived differently when we look back at the past from the vantage point of the present. A life story, a retrospective evaluation of a life lived, is one means of constructing continuity and dealing with the changes that have affected one's life, identity and subjectivity (see Mullen 1992, 269; Löyttyniemi 2004, 49). My intention in this research is to analyze narrated experiences and to draw attention to the process of personal meaning making and the negotiation of cultural norms and ideals. The narrator narrating her/his life produces many different versions of her/him self in relation to other people and to the world. These selves and their relations to others may manifest in internal contradictions. However, recurrent themes and key narratives or key dialogues reveal something important about the ways in which life is made meaningful, as Elsa Koskinen's narrative repertoire makes clear.

The research questions I seek to answer in this study are:

- 1) How have gender, class and work shaped the narrator’s subjectivity?
How does she narrate the changes that occurred with respect to these areas of her life? What are the things that create continuity in her life narrative, and what are the ambiguities that need to be renegotiated in the course of the telling? Why do they need to be renegotiated?
- 2) How does Elsa position herself in relation to shifting cultural ideals, and what kinds of narrative means and strategies does she employ?
- 3) How can the study of an individual life narrative contribute to our general understanding of the power dynamics related to social change and to the role that narratives play in interpreting life experiences?

Examining Elsa’s life narrative opens up a continuous process of dealing with past experiences that are not merely discursive but are also rooted in her *physical* and *material* life as a working-class girl, a young woman, a mother, a homemaker, an active worker and a retired worker in the context of the present. This negotiation is an on-going process of positioning in which the narrator engages in dialogic relations as much with the self as with the other (in this case me), as well as with other persons narrated within the story and the potential readers of the finished work. My intimate relationship with Elsa produced rich data in which Elsa reflects on confusing and painful experiences in her life. This research material, coupled with my knowledge of Elsa’s life and personality offers insights into the complex positioning process of the individual in social transformations and the uncertainties created by social mobility, women’s emancipation and technological progress – in other words, the process of looking for one’s place in a changing world. The end product is a written version, my version, of Elsa’s life narrative as I have interpreted it through the lenses of my scholarship.

Studying the Life of an “Ordinary” Individual

Folklorists have long studied individual storytellers, so-called “tradition bearers”, talented performers and expert narrators living in villages and communities with rich oral traditions.⁶ My research, on the other hand, deals with a person who was not an extraordinary personality or a well-known *expert storyteller* with skills recognized by her/his community. This is not to say that Elsa is not able to weave a colourful story or captivate her listener.⁷ On the contrary, she is a good storyteller and has narrative competence (Hymes 1973, 47–49; also Pöysä 2012, 29). However, only a few people in her closest circle have been able to enjoy her talent and repertoire, which focus mostly on personal narratives, anecdotes and humour.

Everyday life, the perspective from below, has long been the focus of ethnological studies examining people as cultural beings.⁸ The discipline of ethnology was established to document the surviving features of the agrarian tradition and life style, in a word, *folk* culture.⁹ It was not until after the

Second World War that the field came to include the everyday life of industrial workers and their culture.¹⁰ Since the 1970s, Nordic ethnologists have been analysing forms and expressions of cultural identities: nation, gender, age, class, ethnicity and place (Arvidsson 2001, 9–12; Frykman & Gilje 2003, 9). In the 1970s and 1980s, Finnish folklore scholars studied local communities and their storytellers, examining local identities and the relationship between the individual and tradition.¹¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, many folklorists were interested in the expressive traditions of women and the ways in which gender shapes culture and tradition.¹² Moreover, folklore scholarship, which had earlier focused on a seemingly homogenous *common folk* and ignored class relations and antagonisms, began to pay attention to class relations and the oral traditions and oral history of the working class (see, for example, Knuuttila 1992; Peltonen 1996; Pöysä 1997).¹³

Studies of workers, working-class culture and factory communities tend to treat working-class people as a more or less homogeneous group with access to similar possibilities, whose experiences gave rise to shared cultural significance. Many studies started as oral history projects aimed at representing the history of a professional group or a worker community (e.g., Ukkonen 2000; Kortelainen 2008). There are very few studies that explore the individual lives and understandings of ordinary female labourers who were not activists of any kind and who had no special role in the community.¹⁴ My aim in this study is to understand the broader historical changes in society from the perspective of an individual female worker. My assumption is that, by studying a so-called “ordinary individual” and everyday life experiences of ethnological interest such as changes in working life, mechanization, gendered dynamics and social hierarchies, I can enhance understanding of what it means (and has meant) to be a subject, and in this case a worker, in a changing society and how social dynamics shaped the life of an individual in 20th century Finland. Consequently, I hope to shed light on the everyday life experiences of a female worker, and her experience of belonging to the category of workers, a category that was defined differently from the outside than from the inside, and was based on individual and collective identities.

Elsa's Life Context

THE LIFE OF ELSA KOSKINEN

Elsa Sanelma Kiikkala (later Koskinen) was born on the 26th of April 1927, the seventh of twelve children in a factory worker's family living in the factory community of Inha Ironworks (*Inhan Tehtaat*) in the municipality of Ähtäri, in Southern Ostrobothnia in western Finland. At the time of Elsa's birth, the family had temporarily moved to the centre of the municipality as a result of a lengthy strike and lockout of metalworkers that directly affected her father. Later in the same year, her family, the Kiikkalas, returned to their home, a small one-bedroom flat in a large wooden building owned by the Ironworks that was situated in the shadow of a tall smokestack next

This book opens up a window on the life of a female labourer who lived and worked in a small ironworks village in central Finland. Her life touches upon many of the core aspects of 20th-century social change in Finland: increasing educational opportunities, social mobility, the emergence of new technologies and the transformation of gender roles. The research focuses on experiences related to gender, class and work, and on the changes occurring in these aspects of life.

The research material consists of life-narrative interviews charting a process during which the author of this study engaged in an intergenerational dialogue with an elderly woman born in 1927 who is also her grandmother. The research stands at the crossroads of ethnology, folklore studies as well as social, micro and oral history.

Ethnologist Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, PhD works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki.



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