

TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS AMONG THE CHILDREN OF SLOVENE EMIGRANTS ON THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

Transnational Dynamics among the Children of Slovene Emigrants on the Internet

This paper describes how the children of Slovene emigrants interact on the Internet and explores the exceptionally rich communication that takes place among them. This crosses national borders and focuses on a number of cultural phenomena that can be ascribed to transnationality. These links have the advantage of not being controlled or influenced by parents, relatives or others, which facilitates greater freedom and flexibility when forming their own identity.

KEY WORDS: children, adolescents, ethnicity, identity, Internet, transnationalism

IZVLEČEK

Transnacionalne dinamike otrok in mladih potomcev slovenskih izseljencev na internetu

Raziskava dokazuje udeležbo otrok in mladih potomcev slovenskih izseljencev na internetu in raziskuje na trenutke izredno bogato komunikacijo med njimi. Ta poteka mimo nacionalnih meja ter se osredotoča na številne kulturne prakse, ki jim lahko pripišemo transnacionalni značaj. Te nove povezave imajo tudi to prednost, da niso neposredno kontrolirane ali pod vplivom staršev, sorodnikov in okolice, kar omogoča še večjo svobodo in gibljivost pri oblikovanju njihovih identitet.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: otroci, mladi, etničnost, identitete, internet, transnacionalizem.

INTRODUCTION OR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

In the past, theoretical discussions of international migrations rarely paid much attention to children and adolescents. Those whose roots are in geography (Ravenstein, Lee) pay more attention to spatial considerations and population movements, economists tend to focus on rural-urban migration (Lewis, Mabogunje) or differences between the domestic and international work force (Todaro, Borjas). Children and adolescents do appear in the

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research but, as is the case with women, in pre-defined roles (Mlekuž 2010). They are acknowledged, for instance, when we observe how parents are willing to sacrifice their own future for that of their offspring. Or how one of the parents went abroad in order to support the family, which stayed behind. If they are given a role, it is as one of the usual scapegoats for migration.

Even in the case of historical-structural approaches (Castles and Cossack, Piore), which in the 1970s looked upon migration as a social phenomenon subject to hidden forces, or the theory of world systems, which saw migration as an incursion of capitalist economic relations into peripheral non-capitalist societies, there was no particular consideration of children and adolescents. Stark and Levhari (1982) begin to look at migration through the eyes of the family, foregrounding the parents who send family members onto domestic and foreign markets, so that the family can survive where there is a collapse or crisis of some kind. But they talk about children and adolescents only indirectly, more about family members who supposedly participated in decision-making or passively obeyed their parents, but in any case went into the world on their own, supported the family from a distance and perhaps later returned home.

Gunnar Myrdal (1957) connects the country of origin with the host country not only unidirectionally (migrants go there) but also “multi-directionally” (migrants go there and there, and may then return). He was interested primarily in the influence of migrants on the community they left behind and sought to identify the socio-economic factors that influenced “return” migration. He ascertained that people relocated not only to increase their income but that of their family. When some families began to participate in international migrations, hoping for positive results from their decision, the non-migrants felt neglected and left behind, and latched onto the idea of migration as something that would bring their family money and an improved position. Moreover, the idea of migrating changed values and cultural perceptions, thus increasing the possibility of further migrations. In other words, members of families already involved in migration are more likely to migrate themselves. This way of looking at things is also connected to migration network theory, which looks at migration as a sequence of interpersonal links which connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants, both in the country of origin and the host country, through ties of blood and friendship, as well as those within the community (Fawcett 1989). It is thus a kind of social capital that people can make use of in order to get easier access to employment abroad (Gurak and Caces 1992).

Families thus came to play an ever increasing role in migration theories, as an intermediate link between the micro and macro levels, meaning that, in addition to men, attention began to be paid to women (Boyd 1989) and children – and to those who stayed behind as well as those who moved abroad with parents. And although the theory of migration systems – which emphasised international relations, political economy, mutuality and institutional factors, examining both ends of migration currents and in doing so taking into account previous contacts based on colonialisation, political influence, trade, investment or cultural ties (Zlotnik 1992) – meant a step backwards or sideways, as it foregrounded

large impersonal flows of migrants, themes such as the individual, the family, took a firm hold on researchers into migration.

Transnationalism was thus developing further a solid inheritance from the past. It was logical that definitions such as the following appeared, deepening past findings: “Migrants are often included in multi-level, multi-location transnational social fields, incorporating those who left as well as those who stayed behind” (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2003); “some migrants and their descendants have been strongly influenced by their re-occurring connections with their native soil or by social networks that cross national boundaries” (Levitt, DeWind, Vertovec 2003); “life in transnational families includes negotiating between marriage partners, the division of labour, and who would go and who would stay behind”. This kind of development was also noticeable with regard to children and young people: research emerged which shows how they are influenced by migration in certain ways, whether they migrate themselves or not (Repič 2010). For they keep moving from one social system to another, where different norms and values come into play. At home, at school, on the street, at their grandparents, in “the old country” they are subject to different sets of rules and expectations, and have to evaluate themselves in relation to different reference groups (Faulstich, Thorne, Wan Shum, Chee 2000) Their lives proceed in the midst of a dense, transborder field of relationships that incorporates people, places and values from different parts of the world, while their lives may be deeply influenced by forces thousands of kilometres away (Zontini 2007). It is thus not unexpected that their identity is constructed in different ways, though visits to their country of origin, transnational contact, the sending of money and other goods to family members and relatives, and through the Internet, which becomes a synonym for free expression, the construction of (alternative) identities and revolt (Donath 2004). This is not at all surprising if we do not look upon childhood as a normal phase of life or a biological period, but rather as something that is socially constructed (Aries 1991).

THE INTERNET AND ETHNICITY

The appearance of the Internet led to much discussion about changed relations between people, about identity, and about the concept of community, which was reshaped and redefined. The Internet brought new kinds of social contact based on networks, and on bits and bytes, as well as introducing the idea of virtual communities (Rheingold 1994). But when one begins to look for an empirical basis for the theoretical assertions, things become more complicated and the picture less rosy. For the important question immediately arises as to how different online relations between people are and whether it really is a space where, through encounter and debate, things happen that help shape identity (Mlekuž 2009). Different concepts of the virtual community have also encroached into the domain of the ethnic community, transnational community and diaspora. According to Elkins (1999), due to the ever-growing range of tools offered by the Internet, virtual ethnic communities are no longer dependent on direct contact among individuals. Moreo-

ver, electron pulses via broadband fibre-optic cables can offer a sufficient foundation for the existence of such a virtual community.

Leguerre (2002) defines the virtual diaspora² in terms of the use of cyberspace by emigrants and their offspring for purposes of cooperation or inclusion in online interpersonal transactions. This kind of virtual interaction can take place among diaspora groups living in the same state or in different states that are connected with individuals or groups in the homeland, or with non-members of the group in the host country and elsewhere. A virtual diaspora is a cyber extension of a real (physical) diaspora; it cannot exist without some real (physical) contact. By contrast, transnational migrants spread and maintain their social space across national borders, thus undermining their authority. In this way, space conceived as a geographical category begins to lose its meaning (Mikola and Gombač 2008). Currently, the Internet is supposedly the number one transnational medium that allows many to communicate with many, offering a much wider selection of possible lives and identities (Pleše Senković 2004). And thus we arrive at transnationalism again.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out with the help of material and knowledge gained through the project “The Internet as a means of preserving national and cultural heritage among Slovenes around the world”, which paid particular attention to the role and creativity of children and adolescents. This project involved analysis of secondary sources, in this case websites selected by individuals (Meden 2007), other portals (e.g. SVS, Urad vlade RS za Slovence v zamejstvu in po svetu, Thezaurus, SNPJ – Slovenska narodna podporná jednota, SWUA – Slovenian Women’s Union of America, Inštitut za slovensko izseljenstvo in migracije ZRC SAZU, Slovenian Media House, Zedinjena Slovenija, ClevelandSlovenia.com, KSKJ), search engines such as Google and Yahoo, video sharing websites such as YouTube, and the social networking sites Facebook and Myspace. Those sites were considered where it was possible to find mention of or the participation of the children of Slovene emigrants around the world. The question posed was which roles are adopted within this particular transnational context and how free the children and adolescents involved are to shape them; also, how much of a free hand do they have or is there a discernible influence of parents, relatives, societies and their community on the formation of their identities. In this regard, we are not looking at childhood as a normal phase in life or as biological age, but as a social construct (Aries 1991).

² The concept of diaspora is currently in fashion, but there is a problem in the way we understand it as both an intellectual phenomenon and a social process. In his book *Diaspora* Stephane Dufoix says there are no diasporas, only different ways of constructing, managing and imagining the relationship between the homeland and its scattered people. So we need to treat the term, which in Dufoix's opinion, in spite of its frequent use, is often “empty”, with caution.

SLOVENES AROUND THE WORLD AND THEIR OFFSPRING. CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AND THE INTERNET. ENTER FOR THE FIRST TIME

Slovenes around the world and their offspring use the Internet for different purposes. This was ascertained in by 2002 Sanja Cikić in her study “Connecting Slovenes around the world via the Internet: The establishment of virtual ethnic communities”. Since then, the Internet has offered its users many new ways of (self-)promotion. Even without any extensive knowledge of information technology or programming languages, it is possible to create your own website, set up and lead a forum, write a blog, copy video and pictures, and promote your activities in the physical and virtual world. Precisely because of differing levels of knowledge of IT and different needs, users make use of what the Internet and its supporting technology offers in very different ways. Many of the websites of Slovenes around the world were set up to support a specific society, association or group. Usually, they are geographically restricted and address a circle of people that are members of the group or may wish to become so.

On such sites children and adolescents usually appear in quite a passive role, rarely influencing the content of form of the web pages. Usually, their role is prescribed in advance: they are expected to become the future bearers of the tradition, culture and language of the younger generation. This is a pretty clear example of the social construction of childhood. And what do societies and parents expect from them? It is interesting that this does not differ greatly from one continent to another, or one country to another, at least as far as the “traditional”, or in Laguerre's (2002) term “diasporic” websites. So for example in Switzerland:

Our goals are directed towards the future: to bring Slovenes in Switzerland together, and to help our second and third generations not to forget where their predecessors came from. (Planika 2010, translation from the Slovene)

Today, the board includes more and more young people, the second and third generation. With their help we preserve the Slovene language and customs. (Triglav 2010, translated from the German)

in Serbia:

the children greeted St Nicholas and there were also other events, organised and led by many different members. There is a lot of interest in such activities, from the oldest to the fourth generation of migrants. (Sava 2010, translated from the Serbian) Learning our language is of interest to every age group. There are many different reasons to learn: maintaining one's own identity, staying in touch with one's birth-place, young people learning the language and possibly finding future employment in Slovenia. Almost all of our members are in ethnically mixed marriages and so Slovene is not used much within the family. Tuition offers a real chance for all gen-

erations to improve their knowledge of Slovene language and culture. (Kredarica 2010, translated from the Slovene)

in Germany:

Slovenes, who were not numerous enough, wanted the then Yugoslav authorities to provide organised tuition. In Augsburg there was a Yugoslav society which offered extra classes, but in a language which was for Slovene children equally foreign. Parents wanted their children to learn something in Slovene. (Drava 2010, translated from the Slovene)

The society cultivates respect and love among Slovenes for their homeland Slovenia and for Slovene cultural values, a spirit of tolerance towards others among the young and understanding between people. (Lipa 2010, translated from the Slovene) Soon, parents of young Slovene children, most of them born here, began to look for opportunities for them to learn Slovene. (Sava 2010, translated from the Slovene)

in the USA and Canada:

Throughout the years of the groups leaders and coordinators strived to install the Slovenian culture, tradition, and music to second and third generation Slovenian youth, in the form of traditional and modern Slovenian dancing. (Mladi glas & Planika 2010, original text)

The main aim of Slovenska Palma is the preservation of Slovene identity through culture and language. We are a group of Slovenes who would like to maintain contact with the homeland, to spread Slovene awareness and to pass it on to future generations. (Slovenska Palma 2010, translated from the Slovene)

Each adult and child can help make the future of the Slovenian Cultural Garden come into full bloom and preserve the cultural heritage of all nationality peoples in Greater Cleveland. (Slovenian Cultural Garden Association 2010, original text)

in Argentina:

Our aim is to bring together young Slovenes and to raise them in a religious, national and cultural spirit. We strive to achieve this through sport, young people's days, excursions, masses, lectures and meetings. (sdo-sfz 2010, translated from the Slovene) the organised gathering of young Slovenes in Ramos is the best way of encouraging the formation and preservation of links of friendship; it is also often the seed of a new Slovene family. (Slomškov dom Ramos Mehija 2010, translated from the Slovene)

That this really does happen and that young people carry on their shoulders the “burden” of tradition, language, culture and maintaining contact with the homeland,

as well as different cultural and religious practices, is most often shown by reports and photographs of activities and events such as folklore groups, choirs, language learning classes, excursions, religious events, preparing traditional dishes, celebrating festivities and so on (Milharčič Hladnik 2010). Of course, the question arises here as to how many young people (voluntarily) participate in such activities. Research has shown that children of immigrants, in building their identity, rarely incorporate the influence of the “old country” to the same extent and as frequently as do their parents,³ but their lives are nevertheless heavily influenced by faraway places and many of them have the social skills and connections that they need to become translational activists, should they so decide (Levitt 2004). The kind of websites we have seen here rarely offer a direct answer to the above question, especially not from the point of view of the young.

PORTALS, FORUMS, VIDEO RECORDINGS. ENTER FOR THE SECOND TIME

There have been a number of attempts to promote more dynamic communication among Slovenes around the world (Rheingold 1991). Among them are portals such as Thezaurus, Slo-Arg, Triglav and SVS, where interaction is encouraged through forums, galleries, links and so on. In the case of Thezaurus, at least, content changes rapidly, is created more democratically and progresses through discussions in which a large circle of people can take part, including youngsters and even children, who can contribute essays, homework, drawings and other products. But there is still a tendency to see younger generations as responsible for tradition, the language and cultural practices:

Promotion, establishment and maintenance of Slovenian language and culture, principally through the medium of technology assisted learning, to benefit the descendants of Slovenian immigrants. (Thezaurus 2010, original text)

YouTube and similar sites have also begun to be used. This involves the sharing of video footage of celebrations, cultural events, presentations, personalities and parties; young people often contribute to these transnational multimedia exchanges. Here is an excellent description of the situation from one young transnational activist:

Keeping our tradition going for the generations to come, I was fortunate enough that my parents did involve me in a lot of Slovenian Community organisations over the years, especially Mladi glas and Planika, but I found that especially now that we are second, third and fourth generation that is even more important because is not only to learn their culture or where Slovenia is and who we are as Slovenians but is also to know each other, this brings bonds and if we dont pass this to our

³ For more on intergenerational differences in emigration see Lukšič Hacin 1995; Mikola 2005; Toplak 2008; Toplak 2009.

youth than there is no one here to take it over no matter how well organised all this organisations are now if the youth dont take it over in the future than basically we will have nothing latter on. So we have to give them credit and a chance to participate. (YouTube 2010, original text)

Of course, the question arises here as to who shoots the video footage and puts it online. It is possible to recognise some organised group behind the mysterious names (e.g. Slovenska palma, slopalma) and to track their postings, but in most cases this is impossible because of the sheer number of postings involved.

IN AN ETHNIC WHIRLWIND WITHOUT SUPERVISION OR RESTRICTIONS

Most of the present research into the transnational practice and social fields of children and adolescents whose identity is partly Slovene takes place in relation to Facebook and Myspace. These two websites, dedicated to making friends online (Čavič 2008), differ from “traditional” websites and forums in that parents, societies and associations, and forum administrators, have far less influence over any communication, or even none at all. On Facebook there are quite a number of groups linked with themes connected with Slovenes around the world. Sites such as “I feel Slovenia”, “Sexy Slovenians Society”, “People of Slovenian Ancestry”, “You know you are Slovenian when ...”, “There is love in every Slovenian”, “Eslovenos in Venezuela”, “Slovenia: Best country in the world”, “Kiss me... I am Slovenian” “¿Cuantos ESLOVENOS y descendientes hay en CHILE y en el Cono Sur?”, “Canadian Slovenian youth” and “Slovenians in the USA” currently involve almost 20,000 individuals from different countries who are using them as a means to research the Slovene part of their identity. The profiles and data available indicate that these are young people who define themselves as “second, third, fourth generation”, or “100%, 50%, ¼ Slovene”.

These young people decide what generation they are, which cultural practices are important to them, how much Slovene identity they are prepared to accept, nurture or reject, how long they will feel Slovene, and how they regard the transnational efforts of their parents, relatives and people their own age. Their engagement often indicates that their parents had mixed feelings about their inclusion in the society of the host country and passed these feelings on in various ways to their children (Levitt and Glick Shiller 2004). They wanted their children to be integrated, but not too much. Thus the young remember various cultural practices and are pleased to have found “a like-minded community that welcomes you with open arms [...] to talk about your parents and not have to explain anything to anyone in the room because they were all going through the exact same thing” (Levitt 2004). Thus in Facebook and Myspace groups, on the “wall” there appear long debates involving different people and varied themes:

“joining this group is like coming home...cheers!”, “this is probably the best page I have come across in long time. I am proud to be Slovenian!!”, “i never thought i had tradition or culture b/c of the lack of Slovenians in Minneapolis but this group shines light toward me realizing me heritage. thanks!”, “haha, it's groups like this that make me wish I learnt my native tongue!”, “second generation Slovenians are the same!” (You Know et al. 2010, original text)

The various cultural practices mentioned include language learning, playing instruments, singing or dancing:

“I used to play the accordion as a kid and what's more I CHOSE it myself - wasn't forced by my parents (although they were thrilled!)”. “I was involved in pevski zbor and folklorna skupina and so on and so on...”; “Saturdays and Slovenska šola.... lol!!!” (You Know et al. 2010, original text)

Or various festive days, in connection with food (Debevec and Tivadar 2006):

“U know you're Slovenian when mami is preparing 'vampe' meanwhile your friend has arrived for a dinner”, “With us it was smoren that my mom would make for us...and sprinkle sugar or pehleicinke..with jam”, “I miss Slovenia.. ajver, kranjske klobase and potico (njama) and strenge relatives”. “You eat that egg stuff at Easter - ya know - hard boiled eggs with oil, vinegar and horseradish - and mocha (dunk your bread, potica, klobase, speck and everything into it)”, “zu Ostern besuchts, gibt es fünfmal gekochte Eier, Kren, Slivo, Salami und potica (aber nur mit Nuss, nie mit Schokolade). (You Know et al. 2010, original text)

various health-related ideas, such as:

“you're not allowed to leave the house with damp hair”, “ Getting warm soda or juice, because too cold of a drink would hurt your throat”, “prepih kills more people than cancer according to my babi!”, “You have to wear copate around the house, even if you have carpeting and it is 95 degrees outside...” (You Know et al. 2010)

And many other examples which, from different points of view, illuminate different transnational practices and beliefs that children have absorbed from their environment and which they are willing to share online in order to shape a new kind of ethnic community, if only for the few seconds it takes to post on a Facebook or Myspace wall.

CTRL-ALT-DEL OR CONCLUSION

In recent times, research into migration has paid a lot of attention to social networks, institutions and connections that cross national borders, linking in a common social field

emigrants with their country of origin and with those who did not leave. Emigrants send money home and return to their homeland, where they can culturally, socially, politically and economically establish themselves. They can also spread their culture, language and values in the host country. These transnational links and practices are prevalent primarily among the first generation of emigrants (Bryant 2005). But the persistence of such links among the second and subsequent generations is questionable. Some children of emigrants retain some knowledge of their parents' language, visit the homeland and even send money there, but the scale and frequency of such practices in subsequent generations is much less. Research in the USA has shown that most such young citizens prefer to speak English, have not visited their parents' homeland and do not (yet) send money there (Jones-Correa 2004).

But these are not the only transnational practices, although they are the ones most frequently mentioned. Other forms of transnational links, which at first sight are less important, can have far-reaching consequences. Participation by young people in specific kinds of online communication in which they express their ethnicity is an interesting and important transnational practice worthy of more detailed research. In contrast to long-term language learning, visiting their parents' homeland or sending money to relatives, this is a kind of link with the country of origin that can be achieved from one's armchair.⁴ As the above examples show, it does not demand any wide previous knowledge and the pre-conditions for inclusion in a specific virtual group with ethnic content are minimal and flexible. Moreover, "ethnic pressure" or attempts at social construction by parents, relatives or the community that are still apparent on "traditional" websites and portals are lesser or even absent. Perhaps this is the reason why there unfolds a whole range of transnational dynamics involving even young children and influencing the identity of those taking part for some time and then leading either back to the homeland or being lost in cyberspace. As is often the case in the information age, there is simply too much data for us to be able to research and clarify through existing theories and reflections on migration, even the most recent ones. For now, we can only scratch the surface and take pleasure in the heterogeneity of the migrant experiences that young people bring to cyberspace, thus ensuring that they are not forgotten.

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⁴ The Internet is also a suitable space for keeping in touch with the country of origin for those children of migrants who, because of external signs of ethnic identification and visits to the parents' homeland, are exposed to stigmatisation (Žitnik 2008: 90–91).

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POVZETEK

TRANSNACIONALNE DINAMIKE OTROK IN MLADIH POTOMCEV
SLOVENSКИH IZSELJENCEV NA INTERNETU

Jure Gombač

Pri ustvarjanju, kreiranju in uporabi spletnih strani gre za zanimivo in za raziskovalce pomembno transnacionalno dinamiko slovenskih izseljencev in njihovih potomcev. Še posebej se v ospredje postavlja vprašanje, v kolikšni meri lahko pri tej dinamiki sodelujejo otroci in mladi, saj gre v primeru interneta za transnacionalni medij številka ena, prvi, ki omogoča komunikacijo mnogih z mnogimi in v sebi združuje veliko širšo ponudbo mogočih življenj ali identitet. Otroci in mladi izseljenci se stalno selijo med različnimi socialnimi sistemi, kjer delujejo različne norme in vrednote, podvrženi so različnim skupinam pravil, pričakovanj, vrednot, svoja življenja živijo v gostem, intenzivnem čezmejnem polju odnosov, ki zajemajo ljudi, prostore in vrednote iz različnih delov sveta. Zato je povsem pričakovano, da svojo identiteto konstruirajo na najrazličnejše načine, tudi s pomočjo interneta, ki je postal sinonim za svobodno izražanje, konstruiranje (alternativnih) identitet, upor (Donath 2004).

V kolikšni meri pri konstruiranju takšnega otroštva sodelujejo starši, sorodniki, okolica, je naslednje vprašanje, ki si ga je potrebno zastaviti. Raziskave kažejo, da vsaj nekaj izseljenskih otrok in mladih zadrži nekaj znanja jezika svojih staršev, vračajo se v njihovo domovino in tja pošiljajo celo denar, a transnacionalni aktivizem pri njih je v naslednjih generacijah precej manjši kot pri generaciji njihovih staršev. Vendar se zdi, da internet to razmišljanje postavlja na laž, čeprav morda le za nekaj sekund, kolikor traja, da oddamo »sporočilo« na »zid«.