

**THE STRENGTH OF NATIVE TIES:
SOCIAL NETWORKS OF FINNISH IMMIGRANTS IN ESTONIA**

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Abstract. This article, which is based on 24 in-depth interviews conducted in 2005 with Finnish immigrant women in Estonia, analyzes immigrant acculturation in relation to cross-border contacts. I compared weak and strong social ties of two groups: respondents who were living in a Finnish ‘enclave’ separated from Estonian society, and respondents who were socially and institutionally integrated into Estonian society. Surprisingly, there was no notable difference in the type and frequency of inter-personal contacts maintained with Finland between the two groups; most interviewees sustained intense inter-personal contacts with family and friends by phone, the Internet and through reciprocal visits. So-called weak ties that bind together rarely interacting people played a major role in the respondent’s integration into the host society. Those women who had no social contacts within Estonian society preferred to use health-care and social welfare services in Finland, whereas the integrated women had established multiple institutional ties to Estonian society.

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1. Introduction

Moving to another country, immigrants have to find a way to deal with the surrounding society, culture, and local people (Oudenhoven and Eisses 1998, Liebkind et al. 2004). Simultaneously, the social networks consisting of friends and relatives left behind have a great importance for many migrants (for example, Baldassar et al. 2007). Some scholars have claimed that integration into the host society and intense contacts maintained with the country of origin can be parallel processes. Immigrants with the most intensive social, economic and political ties to their country of origin are often also best integrated, economically

engaged and politically active in the host country. However, intense transnational contacts can also indicate negative experiences in the host society (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005, Kivisto 2001, Forsander 2001). Here, I study this question by looking at the cross-border contacts of Finnish mothers living in Estonia in relation to their integration. I ask what kind of personal, social and institutional ties they have in Estonia and what kind of ties they maintain with Finland.

2. Acculturation and social ties

Immigrants' acculturation¹ into the host society is a multifarious, two-way process. There is no single, generally accepted definition of the term, but it is commonly related to issues of identity, belonging, recognition and self-respect (Castles et al. 2002, Liebkind et al. 2004). Nor can it be assumed that the receiving society is a mono-cultural entity into which an immigrant can integrate by simply adopting its culture and traditions. Rather, it consists of people from different classes, with different lifestyles and ideologies, and of different religious and political persuasions (King et al. 2004, Forsander 2001). Unless the host society provides access to these different arenas and accepts the immigrant as a part of society by providing jobs, services and legal rights, the newcomer cannot adapt into the host society (Castles et al. 2002).

In their model, Berry et al. (2002) distinguish four possible strategies for immigrants to relate with mainstream society. The model has two premises, the first of which refers to the degree to which immigrants wish to maintain their heritage and culture, and the second to their desire to have contacts in the larger society and to participate in it. The degree of group membership can be classified as 'high' or 'low' for each of the dimensions, resulting in the strategies for *integration* (high on both), *assimilation* (low, high), *separation* (high, low) and *marginalization* (low on both). Thus, immigrants' perceptions of their social, ethnic or cultural distance to the locals directly influence their chosen strategy. People are more attracted to similar than dissimilar others; a low degree of social distance helps to create a feeling of common identity, closeness, and shared experiences (Berry et al. 2002, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005). According to Allport (1954), close, steady, mutual long-term social relations are likely to

¹ The term 'acculturation' was first used in the 1930s to refer to the continuous contacts between different ethnic groups, as well as the changes in one or both cultures (Liebkind et al. 2004). After that, 'acculturation' and 'integration' have been used simultaneously, sometimes meaning the same thing. Today, most scholars use the terms to explain the changes in an immigrant's values, attitudes and behavior that enable him/her to settle in a new society. This process can take place at a social, institutional, or group level. On the other hand, an immigrant can integrate into mainstream society, another ethnic community than his/her own, or into his/her own ethnic group (Forsander 2001).

reduce prejudices and discrimination between groups who are socially equal and do not compete for limited resources.

In general, the more similar two individuals are, the more likely they are to form a strong tie to connect them (Granovetter 1973). According to Granovetter (1973, 1361), “the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie”. Strong ties are concentrated within particular groups and form closed clusters. Most people tend to socialize with others from a similar background and/or in a similar situation. However, the fewer indirect contacts individuals have, the more encapsulated they will be in terms of knowledge of the world beyond their own friendship circle. Because of that, they are likely to receive information that they already know (Granovetter 1973, 1983).

Contrary to strong ties, weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle by constructing bridges between closed clusters that would otherwise not interact. A bridge provides the only route for a flow of information or influence between two people and anyone indirectly connected to them. Practically speaking, all bridges are weak ties, but not all weak ties are bridges (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Usually, bridges constitute weak ties; a strong tie can be a bridge only if the two people have no other strong ties. If there are several routes for information or influence to flow, the shortest route between two points forms a *local bridge*. Similarly to a highway system, local bridges are more important for connecting people, to the extent that they are the only alternative. Since there are usually several local bridges, it is possible to remove any given connection in the network without damaging the whole bridge (Granovetter 1973, 1983).

Granovetter’s hypotheses have gained empirical support. Studies (Narusk and Hansson 1999, Hansson 2001) on Estonia have indicated that weak ties were the most helpful when respondents needed practical help and/or material resources, information about job opportunities/experts in certain fields, or emotional support. Weak ties were also necessary for entering the main political or economic fields. The role of weak ties was highlighted after Estonia regained independence; during the re-structuring of the economy, people changed jobs more often than before, and growing competition resulted in the deterioration of relationships at the workplace (Narusk and Hansson 1999, 248–249). Because people who had strong ties were likely to share similar information, they were not as helpful; nevertheless, these ties were characterized by trust and emotional support.

Regarding integration into a foreign society, many studies on highly-skilled intra-company transferees (e.g. Fechter 2007, Hindman 2008, Walsh 2008) indicate that ethnic networks are of great importance, because they provide valuable information about practical matters in the new surroundings. Usually these migrants are socially remote from the locals, and their compatriots are the only sources for information concerning the host society. However, Marger’s

(2006) study of immigrant entrepreneurs in Ontario indicated that high levels of human and financial capital, particularly proficiency in English and good business skills, were more important in integrating to the host society than the social capital inherited from ethnic networks. Some of the respondents even avoided members of their own ethnic community because they did not want to depend on the social capital provided by them. On the other hand, studies on immigrants who have established contacts with locals have indicated that these networks provide an important source of social capital (Iosifides et al. 2007, Scott 2006).

Trust or confidence, on which many strong ties are based, also has another dimension: in addition to inter-personal relationships, trust also has macro-level influences. In his study of economic competitiveness between European countries, Helkama (2005) found that the best correlation with a high rate of economic success was trust towards other people. According to him, intra-personal trust explained two-thirds of differences in economic success between countries. On the other hand, those who trusted other people were also likely to trust institutions. Trust towards institutions is highest in highly industrialized societies, which emphasize equality between people and distribute resources evenly, whereas hierarchy, distrust and emphasizing inequality are likely to create suspicion (*ibid.*).

3. Research context

Finnish immigrants in Estonia² form a small but interesting immigrant group, of which there is little previous research (Hyvönen 2007a, Hyvönen 2008). Most of them are highly skilled³ and migrated because of their own or a spouse's career, either through an intra-company transfer or to seek an education, or because of marriage to an Estonian. There are also Finns who migrate to Estonia after retirement, but they are not included in this study. The migration of Finns to Estonia is voluntary; they move by choice, usually for two to five years (Hyvönen 2007a, Hyvönen 2008). Compared with many other immigrant groups in the world, their starting point for the migration is much more affluent because of their abundant resources in social, financial and human capital (see Bourdieu and

² Despite the short distance of only 80 kilometers between the capitals of Helsinki and Tallinn, there are significant differences between the countries, many of them a result of their different histories. Both Finland and Estonia were part of Russia, until they gained independence in 1917; Estonia was later again a part of the Soviet Union in 1940–1991 and was ruled from Moscow, while Finland remained independent. When Estonia regained independence in 1991, it was economically and politically less developed than Finland. Today, Finland is a Nordic welfare state with extensive support for families with children, while Estonia has only recently started developing welfare policies (Ministry of Social Affairs in Estonia 2007). After Estonia joined the European Union in May 2004, the border between Finland and Estonia has become less tangible. Finland regulated the free movement of the Estonian labor force until 2006, but today goods, capital, services and people move freely.

³ Most respondents had either a university or polytechnic education (see OECD 2002).

Wacquant 1992). In most cases, they already have an employment contract when immigrating. Furthermore, intra-company transferees receive a substantial package of incentives to facilitate life abroad, and compared to Finland, an increased salary. On the other hand, most students study veterinary or medical sciences, for which it is easier to obtain admission in Estonia than in Finland. Besides the good starting points of the Finns, the cost of living in Estonia is lower than in Finland: In 2006, the average monthly salary in Finland was about 2550 euros, while in Estonia it was about 550 euros (Statistics Finland 2007, Statistics Estonia 2007). However, the purchasing power parity conversion factor⁴ for Finland was 1.1, while for Estonia it was 0.6 (World Bank 2007).

4. Data and methods

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 24 Finnish women living in Estonia⁵. The first of them migrated in the mid-1990s; most migrated after the turn of the century. Most respondents migrated because of their husbands' or their own careers. At the time of the interviews, the women were between 21 and 42 years old, and all except two had either a polytechnic or university education. All of them had children under 18. Besides the interviews, I observed the daily life of the interviewees, as well as many activities organized by the Finns in Tallinn and Tartu.

The article is based on two illustrative case studies of women, whom I will call⁶ Anna and Emma, but all of the data from the 24 in-depth interviews has been incorporated into the analysis. Anna and Emma each represent one of the strategies of acculturation – integration and separation – that proved to be most commonly preferred by the interviewees in this study. Both women are in their thirties, have university degrees and have lived in Estonia for approximately five years. Anna is married to a Finn, and migrated to Estonia from a third country, where she and her family lived for one year, both moves taking place because of her husband's intra-company transfers. She resides in Tallinn, where the majority

⁴ The purchasing power parity conversion factor to the official exchange rate ratio is the number of units of a country's currency required to buy the same amount of goods and services in the domestic market as a U.S. dollar would buy in the United States.

⁵ The interviews were conducted in 2005 and took place in the interviewees' homes, in cafeterias and at work. The duration varied between one hour and two and a half hours. All interviews were tape-recorded, and the tapes were transcribed, resulting in about five hundred pages of transcribed text. In the analysis, which was completed using the *Atlas.ti* -coding program and grounded theory, the central themes were given code names such as 'Estonian friends', 'Estonian relatives', 'social services in Estonia', 'relatives in Finland', 'friends in Finland' and 'social services in Finland'. These code-groups were combined into code-families such as 'networks in Estonia' and 'networks in Finland' in order to find similarities and differences in the articulated experiences (For more details about the data, see Hyvönen 2007a).

⁶ To guarantee the anonymity of respondents, the names and all recognizable facts have been changed.

of Estonian locals also speak Finnish. She has three children with whom she stays at home. Like most of the 14 women representing this category, Anna's family was planning to return to Finland after a set period of time. These women appeared to have constructed a 'Mini-Finland', a miniature Finnish enclave, which was separated from mainstream society. They watched Finnish TV, listened to the Finnish radio station, read Finnish magazines and shopped in Finnish supermarkets, and did not use the services of Estonian society. Furthermore, their children went to either the Finnish or international school in Tallinn.

Emma, on the other hand, migrated because of her own studies. After graduation she moved back to Finland briefly, but soon returned to Tartu and started working for a Finnish organization. At the time of the interview, she was married to an Estonian man and had a one-year-old baby. Similarly to other interviewees who planned to stay longer in Estonia, Emma knew the language well and had established friends among the locals; seven of the ten women had an Estonian partner and two of them had divorced their child's Estonian father. Emma also participated in many activities organized by Estonian society that were designed for mothers and children, and she had integrated into Estonian society.

5. Separation or integration?

5.1. "Mini-Finland"

As in Anna's case described above, the majority of the interviewees in the group that I call 'Mini-Finland' had followed their husbands on intra-company transfers. Ten of them were on a child-care leave and thus able to maintain their job in Finland; however, two had had to give up their work (Hyvönen 2007a). Traditionally, housewife culture has not been deeply rooted in Finland; rather, the typical gender contract in Finnish society has been based on women combining full-timework and caring for the family. The degree of women's participation in working life is higher in Finland than in most other European countries (Forsander 2007). Thus, staying at home was a new experience for the women, highlighting their role as tied migrants and as mothers, but also placing the emotional and domestic work on behalf of the family on their shoulders (see also Coles and Fechter 2008). Yet, contrary to many other studies (e.g. Oksanen 2006, Beaverstock 2005, Fechter 2007) on highly-skilled expatriates and their spouses, my respondents seemed to be satisfied with being able to stay at home with their children. The (informal) Finnish community had taken an active role in organizing different social events for families with children, and similarly to Anna, most respondents in this group socialized mainly with other Finns. The daily activities designed for mothers and children structured their daily lives and provided social interaction, and also facilitated getting help and exchanging information in practical matters (see also Iosifides et al. 2007, Sanders et al. 2002).

Women who had lived in Estonia for several years said that they had made very close friends within the Finnish community; for others, the ties within Mini-Finland remained weak. This can be explained by people's high mobility: most interviewees had lived in Estonia for a relatively short time and were planning to return to Finland after the intra-company transfer assignment was finished. Two of the women even stated that breaking into the Finnish community had been difficult, because those who had lived in Estonia longer already had their own circles (see also Leppänen 2004). Yet the community provided access to essential information (Granovetter 1973). For the majority, it was not the personal ties that mattered, but the general existence of the network, which created a feeling of security. Using the terms of Granovetter, it created *local bridges* that facilitated daily routines and provided help when needed. As a mother of three reported,

If someone has a panic situation, you can call any time of the day and say that you need help. I have actually received a phone call at two o'clock in the morning from a friend when her labor began, and her older children needed care. I had time to make the beds before she brought them here and then went to the hospital. So that is your support network. In a way you have to ignore thoughts like 'we don't know them well enough'.

These women showed little interest in Estonian culture and the country's everyday forms of social interaction. For example, less than half of them spoke Estonian fluently. Being oriented 'back home' made it challenging to establish social contacts with Estonians. Unlike most of the respondents in this group, Anna had no Estonian cleaning lady or a nanny who came to her house, which for many formed the main bridge to the locals. She pointed out that it took two years before the elderly Estonian couple next door started greeting her; however, she had made friends with another Estonian neighbor, who, like her, had a dog. In this case, the dog functioned as a bridge⁷ between two people who otherwise would have not interacted with each other (cf. Granovetter 1973). Like Anna, some of the women told me they had made an effort to get to know other parents at children's playgrounds or by the soccer field while their children were playing, but these ties remained distant and did not turn into friendships. Because of a lack of social ties to the locals, these women remained outsiders in the surrounding society.

Six of the respondents in this group, all of whom had lived in Estonia for several years, stated that they had made some local friends, but that their best friends were Finnish. They found that establishing a trusting and stable relationship with the locals took a long time. The respondents attributed this to the totalitarian Soviet history of the country, characterized by a low level of mutual

⁷ According to Granovetter (1973, 1983), weak ties provide people access to information and resources beyond what is available in their own social circle, because they construct bridges between the closed clusters. Here, the dog functioned as a bridge, because it created a similar situation.

trust in general. Many of these women also had prejudices towards Estonians (Hyvönen 2007a), which made crossing the bridges even harder. Five of the interviewees in this group were working or studying with the locals. Their interviews indicated that even though these ties constructed important bridges, they never became strong ties. Yet, they provided information that helped the respondents to understand Estonian culture and customs:

The [Estonian] teacher told us a lot about the culture and the customs and all that. How you have to act here so that these people will understand you. – For example, how you make a phone call, it is totally different here than in Finland. So she explained a lot about these things.

5.2. Estonia ceteris paribus

Similarly to Emma, other women who had integrated into Estonian society had originally migrated because of their own career. Like Emma, six other women had existing social ties with Estonians before immigration. They were interested in the local culture, people and ways of life from the beginning. For example, Emma rented a room in a private apartment with two Estonian female students and soon started dating an Estonian man. These ties served as bridges linking her to social networks to which she had previously had no connections (Granovetter 1973), and enabled her advancement in the new social milieu. Through these contacts Emma received vital information about the surrounding society and of the way it functioned, which helped her to settle down. In addition, these new acquaintances introduced her to more people, which increased the number of her social ties. But as shown in the next quote from a mother of four, who migrated because of a marriage to an Estonian, not everybody had existing bridges, and had to clear their own path to cross the bridges:

When I came, I didn't really know anyone here. In Finland I had made friends at the children's playgrounds, but here they didn't exist. But then I made my first friend, when I took my son to a folkdance club, and his partner was such a brisk girl. They were four then. And she wanted to come and play with my son at our house, so I got to know her mother when she brought her here. And we still keep in touch every day.

Also other women in this group established social ties with the locals, mainly in their neighborhood, at work, and through their children's activities (see also Iosifides et al. 2007). Compared with the previously discussed group, these women identified similarities, not differences between themselves and the locals and highlighted the significance of shared views; for them, the nationality or language did not play such a crucial role (Jenkins 2000). Similarly to Emma, six of the women had an Estonian partner at the time of the interview. The partners, and their friends and families provided an important source of social capital facilitating integration (see also Izuhara and Shibata 2002, Scott 2006). These interviewees talked extensively about the pleasures and benefits of their new Estonian family ties (cf. Iosifides et al. 2007, Hansson 2001). As the next quote from Emma's

interview indicates, her mother-in-law, who had just passed away, was very close to her and supplied information concerning daily routines:

My mother-in-law was really close to me, our relationship felt almost as close as the one I have with my own mum. She used to call here really often. And I could ask her all sorts of practical things related to every-day life. Advice.

Unlike most of the Finnish students at the university, Emma felt no need to get involved in Finnish activities. After she had decided to resettle in Estonia, she did find it important to have contacts with her compatriots and enjoyed sharing experiences of motherhood with other Finnish mothers (see also Izuhara and Shibata 2002). She pointed out that there were a few issues that could best be discussed with other Finns. Some of the women assumed that they would have a greater need for socializing with other Finns, if Finland were geographically farther and they could not travel there as often as they wanted. Three of the respondents even pointed out that they had made a conscious decision not to interact with the Finnish housewives described above. They felt that their life situations were radically different and found more of a sense of solidarity with Estonians (see also Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 21). A mother of one, who migrated because of her work, stated:

Well, there are some Finnish people here, whom I would prefer to have nothing to do with. I met some of them at a children's party, and they did not represent my view of life. They come here and do not even bother to study the language; they expect the Estonians to speak Finnish.

Besides social ties, Emma and other women in this group had also established institutional contacts with Estonian society, and were using local health-care services. These social and institutional ties created a sense of belonging, which had a positive effect on integration (Chavez 1991). The respondents pointed out that even though the technology and external conditions were not as developed as in Finland, and the services differed from Finnish ones, they were satisfied with the general quality of the services. A mother of one reported:

I remember when I went to the antenatal classes at the hospital, I thought that oh my... this is really a bit... the paint on the walls was peeling and so on. But when I went there to deliver, I delivered at the local women's hospital, to be honest, when you go to give birth, you don't really have time to see the paint. At that point it is really insignificant... you are there for two and a half days. Well, I mean that I had a bit of a weird feeling, or such a stage of adaptation, and I didn't have time to think about such things. The food was good and the nurses were nice. And I had two roommates, who were nice people. Yes, I had a good experience.

Besides the health-care services, other respondents, like Emma, were also engaged in different social and leisure-time activities. As the next citation from a mother of one indicates, the respondents praised the multiple possibilities for different types of activities for mothers and children organized in Estonia:

There is baby swim, baby music club, baby gymnastics, and for toddlers as well. And then there are playrooms, some of them are at malls, but some are private.

Some of them are free of charge, some cost a little bit... well, a few tenners. I go there with my friends... But what I really like most (laughs) is the art club. We started going there at the beginning of this year, when my son turned 10 months. We have really liked it. I told you that I am such an artist by nature (laughs) so I really enjoy being able to play with colors. We use all kinds of nice materials and the teacher is really excellent.

To sum up, during the initial period following immigration nearly all social ties in Estonia, outside the (accompanying) family were weak for both groups. These ties provided vital information that helped women to advance in the new surrounding. With time, some of the weak ties became strong, and thus did not have similar capacity of spreading information, but they were more easily available than the weak ones. Once settled in, there was no longer a constant need for new information; but as the next section shows, mutual trust in strong ties was of great importance, because strong ties were based on trust (Granovetter 1973, Hansson 2001).

6. Crossing the borders: a question of belonging and confidence

Similarly to both Anna and Emma, most respondents in this study maintained intense inter-personal contacts with their relatives, especially with their mothers and other members of their childhood family, as well as with mother in-laws and friends in Finland, by phone, via the Internet and through reciprocal visits. Because of the geographic proximity of the two countries, I used the number of visits as a measure of the intensity of the contacts⁸. The majority (15) of the respondents visited Finland at least six times a year, and during the past year, all of them had been there at least once. Interestingly, there was no difference in the type and frequency of contacts between the two groups. Like Emma, some integrated women visited Finland monthly, whereas some interviewees in the other group visited only a few times a year. Some women told me, like Anna did, that once they had established strong ties in Estonia, they felt less of a need to visit their families in Finland. On the contrary, for some this need came later. During the first year, Emma felt no need to go to Finland. Instead, she appears to have put all her effort in turning her weak ties into strong ones in Estonia. Next, I will analyze the cross-border contacts of the interviewees in more detail.

6.1. General orientation towards Finland

Finland retained its importance as a country of origin for all of the respondents (cf. Hyvönen 2007b). Similarly to both Anna and Emma, other respondents in this study claimed that their sense of patriotism had increased while living in Estonia.

⁸ The short distance and affordable prices enable more frequent and also brief visits: A journey by ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki can be made in two hours year round, and a round-trip ticket costs 20–50 euros.

Baldassar et al. (2007) found similar results in their study of six immigrant and two refugee groups in Australia. My respondents had started to appreciate many things in Finland that before immigration they had taken for granted, even though some criticisms also had arisen (cf. Leppänen 2004). On the other hand, like Anna, those women who had migrated temporarily, had returning in mind continuously. As a result, they were living as if 'in between' the two countries. All of the interviewees considered themselves Finns, even though similarly to Emma, some of the women who had lived in Estonia for several years claimed that they had been greatly influenced by Estonian society. None of the women had ever considered giving up their Finnish citizenship, yet they did not show any major political interest towards the Finnish state nor participate in political or civic activities besides voting in the Finnish national elections.

6.2. 'Recharging one's batteries'

The importance of the strong ties 'back home' was highlighted during the initial period following immigration, because of the challenges of living in Estonia, the lack of social networks and confusion about the foreign society and its customs (see also Järvinen-Tassopoulos 2005, Herrera Lima 2001, Hyvönen 2007b). These ties were something that lasted, whereas the social relations formed in Estonia came with continuous changes. Besides routine visits, the respondents found it important to spend traditional holidays, such as Christmas and birthdays, with their families in Finland. Some women also used work-related visits as an opportunity to catch up with their family. The visits provided breathing room from the mentally challenging daily life in Estonia and created a sense of belonging (see also Ågren 2006, 171). As the next quote from Anna's interview reveals, being able to 'see' and share a physical connection with family and friends 'back home' was something that gave strength to cope with the challenges of the foreign environment (see also Baldassar et al. 2007):

They were moments of recharging my batteries[11]. I went there and spent time with my own folk and relatives, and after that I had strength to try to understand the foreign culture.

Most interviewees exchanged practical and emotional help with family and relatives during the visits. None of the women said that they gave or sent money to their parents, but mentioned gifts. The most important form of assistance from parents was looking after the children. Because most of the grandparents had retired but were still in good health, they could, if needed, also travel to Estonia to help take care of the children for a few days, sometimes even a week. This option was highly appreciated; the interviewees preferred to leave their children in the care of a familiar person rather than a hired nanny:

If something were to happen to me here, yes, I do have a few numbers which I can call and ask for help. But it's not at all the same as getting someone I know and who knows my children and whom I can trust. Well, maybe I just think that no-one else besides me and the grandmothers can care for the children.

Despite frequent visits, the amount of time spent together was limited, and some of the interviewees said that they had a bad conscience because their children could not spend more time with their grandparents (see also Oksanen 2006). On the other hand, as Baldassar et al. (2007) noticed in their study, the respondents in this study said that seeing each other less frequently led to better-quality exchanges; “people were on their best behavior” during the visits. For others, as the next quote from a mother of two indicates, living abroad had strengthened relationships with relatives and friends, because instead of visits lasting only a few hours, several days were spent together:

If you are in Finland and you visit the grandparents, it's for an evening. But while here, my children have got to know their grandparents, godmothers and other relatives much better than they would have in Finland, even though we lived so close by. Because here, when you visit, you visit properly. I really like that.

Besides relatives, most of the interviewees reported that they maintained contacts with two or three friends in Finland, even though some of those who had lived abroad for several years said that their circle of friends in Finland had become rather small. Whereas the respondents found visiting relatives important mostly for their children's sake, the relationships with friends were more significant in fulfilling their own social needs. As the next quote from an interview of a mother of two, who had lived several years in Estonia, reveals, she had a long history with her friends in Finland, and the relationships were characterized by trust:

If I think about my social relations, all my childhood friends are there, and they actually have kept in quite close contact with me. I see them when I go there. So if I really want to socialize, I go there and see my friends, because they are the people who know me and whom I know really well. That way I don't always have to start from the point where I come from and what I've done – I don't always have the strength to get to know new people.

6.3. 'I have no need to go there'

Even though the majority of women enjoyed the reciprocal visits, this was not the case for everybody. Some of the interviewees felt that their lives had settled in Estonia and they had no need to go to Finland. Like Emma, some women tried to limit the number of visits because traveling with small children was exhausting, and packing and unpacking luggage as well as staying at other people's places was tiring. Some women pointed out that their relatives lived geographically so far away, some even in a third country, that it was too far to travel for a brief visit. When these women visited their families, many relatives had a lot of expectations for the visits, which often turned out to be rather hectic (see also Baldassar et al. 2007, Lukkarinen Kvist 2006). Using the words of a mother of three: “*We go there, and dripping sweat, try to visit all the relatives, and then we come back exhausted*”. Because of that, some of the respondents preferred to see their family

and friends in Estonia, because it was more convenient for them. As most of the interviewees had spacious and comfortable homes, they were happy to host guests and show them around; however, some respondents said that they had become tired of too many visitors.

Finally, a few of the interviewees stated that they felt that they were compelled to make the visits to Finland; it was nothing that they enjoyed. Often this had to do with a problematic relationship with their mother, and the immigration had provided a desired mental distance from that relationship (Hyvönen 2007a). These women visited only seldom and experienced mixed emotions during the visits:

We go there really seldom. Maybe three times a year. The grandparents call here all the time asking if we could come over. But it is a fact that we don't really miss anything from there. – My mother is such a strong and dominant person. She still tries to control me. Even though I took distance from her when I moved here, she still tries to make my decisions on my behalf; for example, she has told me that she could make me a personal budget. – So after a few days I am really ready to come back.

To sum up, the strong ties in Finland formed a tower of strength for most respondents, especially right after immigration. Even though they obviously did not provide a similar source of practical support as did the weak ties in Estonia, they were an essential part of coping with the challenges of living in a foreign society: the visits were a time of 'recharging one's batteries'. Interestingly, living in separate countries did not appear to visibly constrain help in childcare, as many of the grandparents were able to help for extended periods of time either in Finland or Estonia. Despite the distance, the parents of the immigrant were an essential part of her daily life (see also Baldassar et al. 2007).

7. In-between the weak and strong ties: institutional connections

Besides inter-personal ties, similarly with both Anna and Emma, the majority (19) of the women maintained institutional ties with Finland; they belonged or had earlier belonged to the Finnish welfare system. According to the legislation, those with a Finnish employer (and their family members) as well as Finnish students are entitled to the relatively generous economic, material and healthcare benefits of the Social Insurance Institute of Finland for the first five years of living abroad (Social Insurance Institution of Finland 2008). Taking advantage of this, some of the respondents preferred to give birth and have regular check-ups in Finland. As in the case of strong social ties, using Finnish services was connected with the issue of trust. As the following quote from a mother of two, who migrated because of her own work reveals, the Finnish system was familiar and safe, easy to access, and the women could communicate in their own language. Many respondents also had prejudices towards Estonian services, especially at the beginning:

When I had my first child, I had no idea how to find the services here and that's why I went to Finland. But with the second child everything has gone well here, I haven't had any problems. But at the beginning I didn't know how to search for them here... and also at the beginning I really didn't trust this system and I preferred to have them in Finland.

Besides institutional ties, some women in both groups had established important weak ties to other mothers from different backgrounds through Internet discussion websites. These sites provided a refreshing possibility to 'leave' home when it was physically not possible, and provided both information and mental support. Nearly all of the women claimed that the discussion on the Finnish sites was more profound, because it consisted of analyzing feelings of loneliness, fatigue and confusion in the face of a new life situation, whereas the Estonian sites provided information about local matters. Especially newcomer mothers found the websites useful and stated that discussions with others in a similar situation supplied important mental support (see also Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 21). A mother of one said:

I visited the discussion sites when I was pregnant, and I got so much support from reading the stories, even though I never wrote anything. But even reading what other people had written helped me.

In conclusion, similarly to the inter-personal ties, the respondents maintained institutional ties with Finland primarily because the familiar and safe health-care system instilled their trust. However, these connections were not inter-personal, because it was *the system*, not a specific doctor or nurse that was mentioned. On the other hand, the contacts made on the Finnish websites can be compared to strong ties because of the mental support that they provided, whereas the Estonian sites formed local bridges. They provided important information, which, however, could be received through several routes.

8. Concluding discussion

This article has focused on weak and strong social ties of Finnish migrant women in Estonia in the light of two acculturation strategies: separation and integration. It was shown that irrespective of the acculturation strategy, weak ties played a major role in the settlement during the early period of immigration (cf. Granovetter 1973, 1983). These ties were important, because they were the only sort of ties most women had in Estonia; the strong ties 'back home' could not provide the information needed for advancement in the new surroundings. Weak social ties helped gather information that eased the process of settling in. On the other hand, the strong ties represented strong emotional support for both groups, a way of 'recharging the batteries'.

Like other studies (e.g. Coles and Fechter 2008, Fechter 2007) on intra-company transferees, Anna's case illustrated how women living in a kind of Mini-Finland in Estonia had integrated into the Finnish community and had a very

limited number of social and institutional ties to Estonian society. Despite geographic and cultural similarities, these women perceived a social, ethnic and cultural distance to the locals (Berry et al. 2002, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005). Because of that, they encountered difficulties in establishing any sort of ties with the locals. Nevertheless, the ties with other Finns in this enclave often remained weak, but they provided essential information that facilitated daily routines in Estonia. For these women, it was group-based activities rather than dyadic ties that mattered. These ties constructed local bridges, because the same information could be received through several routes (Granovetter 1973, 1983). The role of these women as 'tied migrants' and mothers was emphasized through their role as housewives, and their daily lives were structured around Finnish activities for mothers and children. Sharing daily life with other Finns helped the women share mutual care, empathy, and loyalty and developed a sense of belonging (Walsh 2008).

The case of Emma, by contrast, illustrated a strong preference for integration. In this group, the level of integration varied: some respondents were working for Estonian companies, socialized mainly with locals, used multiple Estonian services and claimed that they had adopted many traits from the surrounding culture. Others, like Emma, were working for a Finnish organization and had both Finnish and Estonian friends. All of these women spoke Estonian fluently. Thus, this study gives support to the findings of Marger (2006), who claimed that good language skills are more important in integration into the host society than the social capital provided by ethnic networks. Quite the contrary, most of these women had an Estonian spouse, which influenced their integration positively. They mentioned that the friends and relatives of the local partner in time became more important than Finnish networks (Hyvönen 2007b). It can be concluded that these women had overcome the mental borders and had a sense of belonging to Estonia, which has a positive effect on integration (Chavez 1991). Contrary to the other group, these ties were based mostly on dyadic relationships; participating in different group activities did not play such an important role. Similarly to Estonians who have migrated to Finland, these ties provided an important source of social capital, because it enabled to discuss certain issues on a mutually understood level, where the understanding of locals differed.

Regardless of acculturation strategy, the strong ties consisting of relatives and friends in Finland remained very important for women in both migrant groups. The strength of these ties lied in the trust and sense of belonging that they instilled: they were characterized by a long, common history between two people, by emotional intensity and reciprocal help. Their significance was highlighted especially during the initial period following immigration, when most respondents found life in Estonia challenging. Some respondents also maintained intense non-personal ties with Finland. Especially those women who migrated for a set period of time had prejudices towards the services provided by Estonian society, and because of that they preferred the Finnish alternatives.

Granovetter's (1973, 1983) theory is quite efficient in explaining the contemporary phenomena of weak and strong ties. However, it does not fully grasp non-personal ties, such as the capacity of pets to function as social bridges, or ties that are somewhere in-between strong and weak. In this study, the institutional ties that many of the respondents maintained with Finland represent these in-between ties. Similarly to inter-personal ties, these ties were based on a general social trust, which is high in contemporary Finland but lower in Estonia (Helkama 2005). The interviewees preferred to use Finnish services, because they found them reliable. As Helkama (2005) noted, people who trust other people are also likely to trust institutions. According to the respondents, the Finnish welfare state model was characterized by equality between people, and distributed resources evenly, which was why they preferred to use services in Finland. Because of the short geographic distance between the countries, the respondents of this study were better able to frequently cross the borders and also for brief periods (Baldassar et al. 2007) and could practically speaking determine the type and frequency of contacts maintained with Finland without any limits (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Interestingly, there was no notable difference between the two groups in the type and frequency of inter-personal contacts maintained with Finland.

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Appendix

The article is based on the following interviews:

#	Year of birth	Years in Estonia	Children	Level of education	Original reason for migrating
Mini-Finland					
1	1983	1,5	1	University	Own studies
2	1971	2	2	Polytechnic	Husband's career
3	1973	2	1	University	Husband's career
4	1970	4,5	3	University	Husband's career
5	1969	4	2	University	Husband's career
6	1974	1,5	2	University	Husband's career
7	1970	2	2	Polytechnic	Husband's career
8	1967	5	2	University	Own career
9	1959	4	2	Secondary	Husband's career
10	1976	4,5	2	Polytechnic	Husband's career
11	1974	6	1	University	Own studies
12	1969	1	3	Polytechnic	Husband's career
13	1975	9	2	University	Own studies
14	1968	1	2	University	Own career
15	1975	1,5	3	University	Husband's career
Estonia Ceteris Paribus					
16	1972	8	2	Vocational	Husband's career
17	1977	6,5	1	University	Own studies
18	1963	10	1	University	Own career
19	1964	6	4	University	Marriage
20	1972	3,5	2	University	Own career
21	1974	5	3	Polytechnic	Own career
22	1974	5	1	University	Own studies
23	1964	4	2	Polytechnic	Own studies
24	1974	6	1	University	Marriage