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Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Students' Depictions of Their Gender Roles in the Context of Finland/Europe

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Abstract

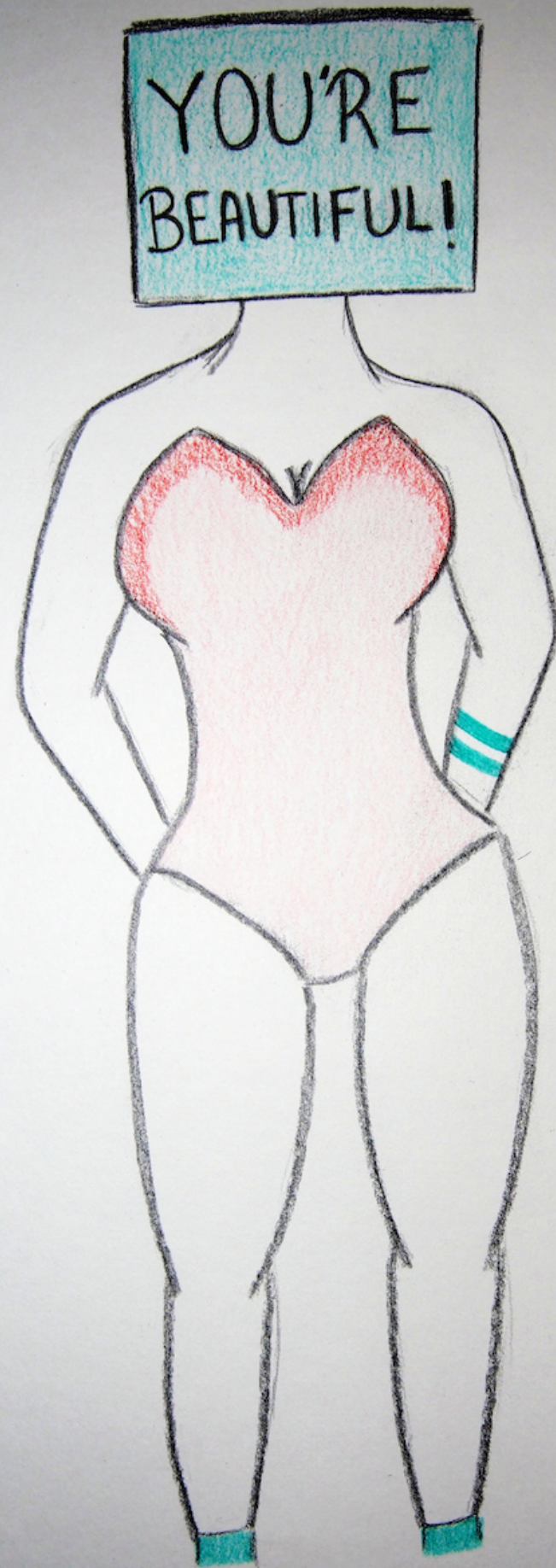
Recent intercontinental and European mass migration has changed population structures all over Europe and globally. It remains to be seen how permanent these changes are and what consequential and unrelated events will occur in the future. Events that occurred in 2015 have had immediate impact on political and media climates as well as resulted in polarization of political stances and policy views by the general population, especially regarding immigration laws. This article introduces a small part of a research data created with and collected from youth and adult students with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds attending a vocational college in Finland. This part of the study explores students' gendered experiences of living in Finland and/or Europe through self-portraits created in response to a course assignment. The author believes that studying by studying immigrant and refugee identities and experiences educators and researchers can formulate pedagogical concepts, theories, and practices that have potential to reach beyond norm- and difference-based thinking

Keywords

Gender, gender identity, gender experience, immigrant and refugee students, arts-based research and pedagogy

Recent intercontinental and European mass migration is creating rapid changes to population structures all over Europe and globally. It remains to be seen how permanent these changes are and what consequential and unrelated events will occur in the future. While individual, group, and tribal migration is hardly a new phenomenon in Europe, events that occurred in 2015 have had immediate impact on political and media climates as well as resulted in polarization of political stances and policy views by the general population, especially regarding immigration laws.

Official statistics show that the population of Finland was just shy of 5.5 million in 2015 (Statistics Finland, 2016). In 2015, the population grew by 15, 5000 people. While native speakers of the three official languages (Finnish, Swedish, and Sami) declined by 4,000, the number of non-native language speakers living in Finland grew by 19,000. The most common non-native languages spoken by people living in Finland were Russian, Estonian, and Somali. In 2013, the population of foreign-born people living in Finland exceeded 300,000 which makes 5.5% of the population overall. While this percentage does not appear high on European (6.8%) or global scale the change in population has been significant during the past two and half decades as in 1990 the number of foreign-born residents of Finland was 26,300 (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Also, population over the age of 65 is 6th highest in Europe. Another interesting statistic reveals that in 2014, 22% of women who spoke national languages as their mother tongue and were between the ages of 45-49 had not given birth (Statistics

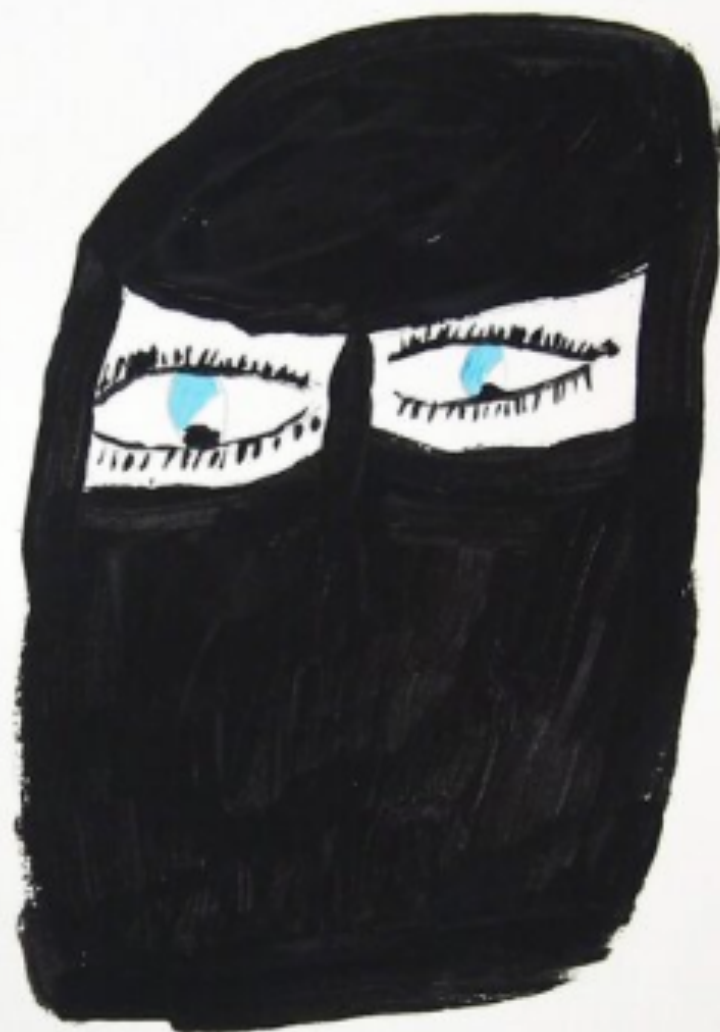


Finland, 2014). Compared to the past few decades this number is steadily increasing (Statistics Finland, 2015).

This article introduces a small part of a research data created with and collected from youth and adult students with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds who are enrolled at Helsinki Vocational College. For the past ten years, the author has been studying immigrant identities and experiences with her research/teaching partner Paula Toiviainen. Utilizing arts-based methods and pedagogy, the overall purpose of the larger study is to form a more comprehensive understanding of the self-perceptions, subjective and (non)contextual identities of those who have experienced forced or voluntary migration. Further, the author believes that by studying immigrant and refugee identities and experiences of (un)belonging educators and researchers can formulate new pedagogical concepts, theories, and practices that have potential to reach beyond norm- and difference-based thinking.

Our larger study has typically engaged groups in which all students have immigrant or refugee backgrounds or who qualify for specialized education services as a result of their families recent arrival to Finland (second generation immigrant families). This part of the study focuses specifically on perceptions and understanding of gender among students enrolled in Art & Culture courses mandatory to students enrolled in degree studies in welfare sector.





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Recent refugee and immigrant groups arriving in Finland have been disproportionally comprised of young males compared to those of women and children. This off-balance in gender and age division combined with the general climate of polarization of immigration policy views has convinced us not to study immigrant groups of students in isolation to avoid further differentiation. Instead, for this portion of the study we have chosen to focus on groups in which a fairly even number (or majority) of students come from immigrant backgrounds.

Helsinki Vocational College offers vocational upper secondary education to youth as an alternative to studies in high school or as a transitional course students who need to complete 10th-grade before transitioning into high school. The adjoined Helsinki Vocational Adult Institute offers "vocational adult education and training, apprenticeship training, competence tests, and working life functions" (Helsinki Vocational College, 2016). The official educational language is Finnish.

Students who participate in our study are enrolled in the Practical Nurse preparatory and professional qualification program and many will later earn advanced professional credentials for health- and social care. Upon graduation, they will most commonly work in preschools, nursing homes, institutions for people with disabilities, home health care systems or with mental health care services. As their profession requires fluency in their ability to relate to diverse people, it is seen essential that students learn to explore their own creativity as well as utilize art and visual communication in interaction and as a means for instruction and to improve client (and

personal) wellbeing. Educational values ethics, aims at equality, fosters listening, acceptance, and support, and aims to build diverse means for connecting and relating.

Students' ages range between 17-45 years. The group consists of both Finnish-born students and students with immigrant or refugee backgrounds as well as students who were born in Finland but their native tongue is not Finnish and their parents immigrated to Finland. The division between these groups was fairly even in the group whose work is presented here, however, some variation exists in the broader participant group. Seventeen students were present and created drawings or painting similar to those presented in this article. Fourteen participants gave their permission to study and publish their artwork. There were 14 students who identify themselves as women and three self-identified as men present during the session.

The assignment encouraged students to explore their experiences of living in Finland and/or Europe. The instructor asked students to depict themselves as a person living in Finland. Although the focus of this session was gender and gendered experiences and maleness and femaleness in the cultural context of Finland was discussed openly, identification as either was not emphasized. In general the division between a man and a woman was not brought up in conversations by students or verbally contested.

Drawing and painting materials, which students are already familiar with, were made available. Students were encouraged to portray themselves realistically or symbolically. As with all visual and artistic studies in this vocational program, technique and skill are not emphasized or assessed, rather students' participation in activities and group discussions is valued. Once the assignment had been explained in conversational style most students began to work.

Many educators speculate that students face insecurities depicting a human body or face. This group did not hesitate with intent or express uncertainty related to skill or abilities. Some students studied "selfies" and other images of themselves prior to working, some worked with mirrors. While others began with words that best describe their personalities or characteristics, others sketched visually. Some did not draw themselves but worked in pairs.

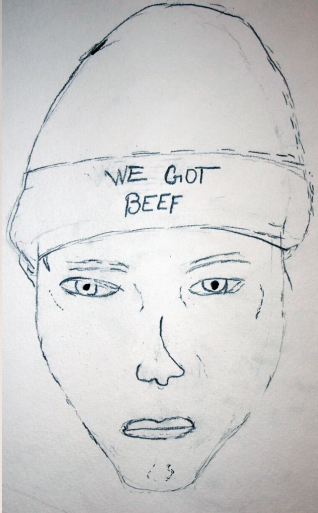
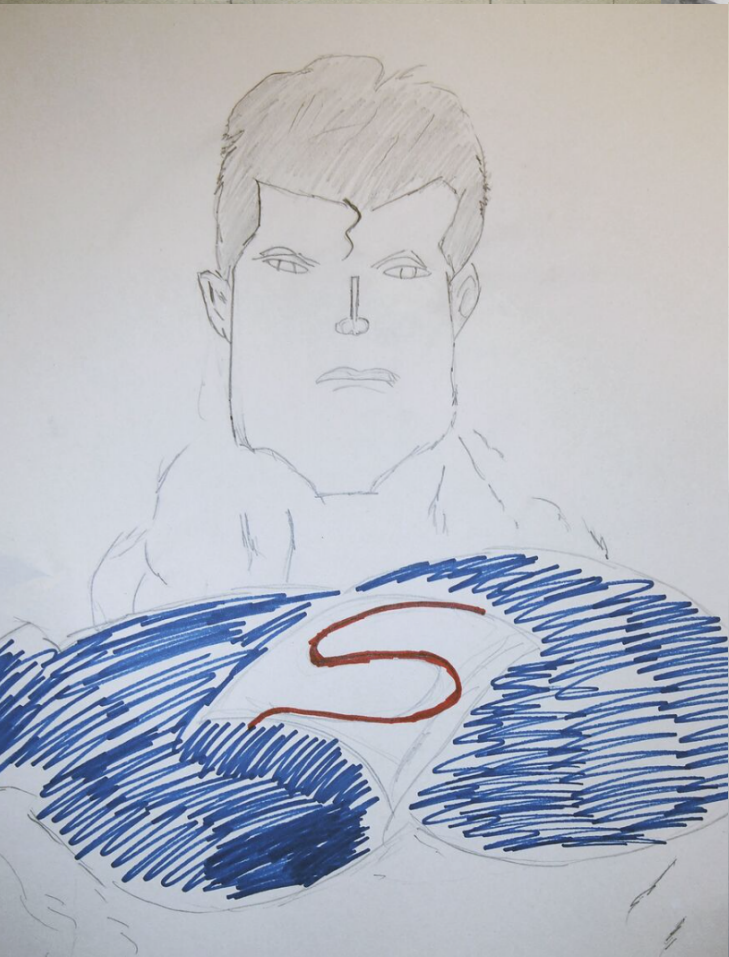
While it is not the author's intent to analyze or categorize these student-created self-portraits in this context, a few remarks might be needed. We have just begun to work with the gender-focused material and as it is with all visual data and narratives created with and by immigrant students, we are humbled and challenged by the complexity of the information shared with us. How people express and conceptualize their culturally, historically, socially, and economically contextualized gender identities utilizing art is an endlessly fascinating interplay of (in)direct intention and ability to express thoughts. The author chose to present all work created by one group rather than examples from several groups as this way no work needed to be

categories as representing others or as a symbolic example for other works.

In this group the male images were dominated by focus on the faces. Only one image depicting a male included a body and this body was portrayed with super hero features. Rather strikingly many of the women portrayed bodies that did not include all body parts, were headless, or an eye was either missing or both were covered. Some of the works include text or other symbols, which also carry participant identified significance. It is also important to note that while students are restricted to only use Finnish as their educational language, these rules are not guarded in art classes.

Working with adults, children, and youth of immigrant (and mix of non-immigrant) backgrounds foster deeper questioning of norms, assumptions, and bias. Utilizing arts-based research methods and arts-based pedagogy enables emotional, sensitive, playful, radical, critical, and imaginary perceptions of socialized and contextualized identities and subjectivities to emerge. While imagining a culture and atmosphere of acceptance and openness in today's political climate seems far fetched and illusionary, the author and her research partner see this kind of work as an opening that can lead to unpacking norms and boundaries of acceptance in art education pedagogy.

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