Miserable or Golden Karelia?
Interpreting a Cross-border Excursion of Students from Finland to Russia

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Miserable or Golden Karelia? Interpreting a Cross-border Excursion of Students from Finland to Russia

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Abstract

Two border towns, Joensuu in Finland and Sortavala in Russia, are situated on different sides of the border which cuts across the peripheral region Karelia. A group of 40 Finnish students from the University of Joensuu went on a 2-day excursion to Sortavala in March 2007, being curious to see the anticipated and imagined place of others. During this 2-day excursion, these Finnish students, who had recently started studying Social Policy, were instructed to make notes on everything that they experienced as being different from their own living milieu. The notes made on this excursion give us a snapshot of what it is like to cross a border between familiar and unfamiliar societies. A phenomenological interpretation of the students’ travelogs tells us how they carried their previous knowledge as well as all their assumptions and prejudices with them. It can be seen how even a short border-crossing experience influences perceptions of young people about otherness in confusing or reflexive ways. On returning from the trip, many of them found that they looked at their own situation differently than what they had done earlier.

Introduction: Going on a Cross-border Excursion

Two Karelian towns, Joensuu and Sortavala, have a historical connection even though they are currently separated by a border which cuts the region of Karelia into Russian and Finnish parts. Karelia was one of the traditional provinces of Finland and it covers a large part of northwestern Russia. Both Russians and Finns consider Karelia a peripheral regional entirety which has never formed a nation-state. It consists of several different districts like a mosaic, being culturally composed of characteristically different parts. Border Karelia, Ladoga Karelia and Karelian Isthmus are currently on the Russian side; South Karelia and North Karelia are Finnish provinces (see the map in Figure 1). During the nineteenth century, especially after WWII, the parts that belonged to Finland developed differently than the parts belonging to Russian Karelia.

According to a common view, the socioeconomic gap on the Finnish–Russian border is striking. The disparity in living standards is accentuated by the different regional policies (Alanen and Eskelinen 2000). Finland has improved its regional living conditions by means of welfare strategies and later received public income transfers meant for the peripheral regions of EU member states. In Russia, where corresponding border policies have not been practiced, border regions have become ruined, while the better-off areas and big cities have become affluent. People are now seeing regional cross-border co-operation policies and interactions as important for the future development of both sides of the border (Liikanen et al. 2007).

The 40 first-year Finnish students from the University of Joensuu who went on a 2-day excursion to Sortavala in March 2007 observed not only economic disparities, but also political, social and cultural differences between the two societies. This article interprets how the reality behind the border was seen by these Finnish students. The students who took part in this trip and reported their experiences had just started their academic studies in Social Policy. They were all Finnish citizens, born in different Finnish regions. Currently, they live in Joensuu. According to what they had mentioned in their reports, their earlier travel experiences varied vastly from each other. For some students, this was the first trip abroad in general, some had previously visited Russia and some had a global traveler’s perspective.

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The students were instructed to make notes on everything that they saw during their visit as being different from their familiar milieu and their own living conditions. These travelogs were included in their course reports. Exactly 38 reports were accepted in the course examination, 23 written by females and 15 by males. The age of almost two-thirds (24) of the participants was between 20 and 22 years. Ten of the remaining participants were aged below 30 years and a few adult students were even older. This reflects the usual composition of the Social Policy student body in Finnish universities. This information is based on the study record; otherwise, only the contents of the travelogs are used as empirical data in this article.

The reports made on this excursion give us a snapshot of what it is like to cross a border, meet a new confusing reality and see things differently than what is seen usually. The students reported their previous expectations, first impressions and experiences during the trip. They made interpretations of what they saw, heard and understood about their destination. Through this narration, a picture is formed of the trip—and also of the travelers themselves.

The travelogs of the students were used as a basis to construct a meaningful story from multifaceted interpretations. The reality of Russian Karelia was not analyzed as such, but situational experiences were observed and interpreted, and conclusions were drawn in the expected context of the travel. Situational
observations and experiences are infiltrated by preconceptions, when invisible borders are constructed between the familiar circle of “us” and the unknown spheres of others. Urry (2007, 12) described the fluid situation of modern travelers by saying that those who live in a touristic interspace attempt to obtain new experiences, are always on the move and know that they lack the time to get in deeper in order to confirm that experiences are real and authentic. Without feeling at home, only the situated surface of strange atmospheres is seen. One who tries to get familiar with strange situations needs to understand meanings of events in the pre-constructed frames. Earlier experiences help the travelers to find comparable frames in new situations. As applied to a theory-seeking research approach, this strategy demands that the researcher reflexively rethink the boundaries formed by earlier lived situations of the participants, interpret the manifestation of changing perceptions in cross-border situations and note the significance of renewed consciousness after returning from the reality of the others (cf. Ackerley and True 2010, 80–96; see also Cohen 1979, 179–201; Delanty 2005).

The Situated Frames of Cross-border Travel

The cultural image of Karelia is enriched by the folk tradition and heroic myths of the *Kalevala*, the epic poem of Finland, which contributed considerably to the formation of Finnish national spirit in the nineteenth century. Imagined memories of a golden past of Karelia are entangled with ideals of nationalism. In the romantic view of nation-building, Karelia was imagined to be the cultural cradle of Finnish identity (cf. Anderson 2006 [1983]). Another image contributes to the otherness and poverty of contemporary Russian Karelia in relation to both Finnish and Russian better-off regions and their inhabitants. Images of distant borderland Karelia are inspired by both the romanticism of poverty and the needs for social improvements. In the Finnish context, interpretation of Karelia as a lost place serves, as Fingerroos (2007, 18–19) said, the politics of yearning, fed by the memories of lived experiences.

The continuous changes in the border between Finland and Russia are exemplified in the history of Sortavala situated on the shore of lake Ladoga, about 70 km to the east of the present border of Finland. The charter of the trading center Sordavalla was granted by the Swedes in 1632. During the eighteenth century, the town came under the control of Russia, renamed Serdobol and burned to ashes by the Swedish forces. During the period of the Finnish Grand Duchy (1809–1917), under the rule of the Russian Empire, the reinforced Sortavala was the capital of the Wiborg province. After WWI, from 1917, this area of Karelia belonged to the independent Finland until the end of the winter war in 1940 when large parts of Karelia came under the control of the USSR. The Finnish inhabitants were evacuated, but they returned after the Finnish army occupied these areas. In 1944, these people left their homes again and the current border was drawn through Karelia. The resettled Sortavala became a USSR territory, in the Russian Federation (Hakamies, Liikanen, and Simola 2001). Presently, there are about 36,500 inhabitants in the area of Sortavala, mainly Russians, but a minority still have Finnish roots.1

Joensuu is situated in North Karelia about 100 km to the west of the eastern border of Finland. The foundation of the town in 1848 was motivated by the need of a regional center for manufacture and commerce. Industrialization during the latter part of the 1800s made it possible to process wood in the local sawmills. The harbor was built for the regional water traffic, thanks to the existence of a town in the river mouth between Pielisjoki and the lake Pyhäselkä. Currently, Joensuu is one of the three main cities in Eastern Finland. It has about 73,000 inhabitants (Semi 2010, 110–16).

The history of the University of Joensuu is interestingly linked to the Sortavala seminary, which was founded in 1880 to stimulate the national spirit by means of education. The seminary was evacuated from Finland after WWII and located to Joensuu in 1953. The foundation of the university in 1969 was a result of regional development policy. A source of motivation for social and human research was Karelian history and culture (Ahponen 1996, 188; Nevala 2009, 74, 246). The recently created University of Eastern Finland2 aims to strengthen its strategic competitiveness, with one of its priorities being multi-sided Russian studies and cross-border research. The trip, described in this article, was arranged in the planning
phase of the university reform. However, strategic objectives of possible cross-border projects are not the focal point of this study. Crossing the border, both concrete and imaginary, is illustrated from a sociocultural micro-perspective by interpreting the contents of the travelogs.

Not only the age of the study group but also the generation it belongs to is of significance in this interpretation. Presently, young Finnish people see Karelia differently than how their parents or grandparents saw, notwithstanding whether they have Karelian roots or not. Ladoga Karelia or Karelian Isthmus has never been a lived reality to them. The Karelian story is a fiction-like narrative, a lost utopia, covered by golden family memories, learned from history and transformed through the mediation of cultural sources (Fingerroos 2010, 158–60). When structuring their own cultural identities and constructing their political perspectives, young people test their relationship with national borders and transnational realities. This relationship is made concrete in travel which connects the expectations and personal observations of the travelers with their perceptions of otherness and attitudes toward foreigners as mediated through public information channels.

**Interpreting travel observations**

It is worth noting that this trip was a part of a special course in Social Policy. The main aim of the whole course was to make sociopolitical practices more realistic. The trip was made with the intention of strengthening the social identity and the common group spirit of the students as well as of showing the significance of the borders between societies. In this case, strong ideological barriers have separated the inhabitants of Karelia during the past few decades. The students were asked to compare observed similarities and differences between Finland and Russia from a cultural, social, economical or environmental perspective. This orientation, and especially the adoption of a social–political outlook, played a part in the course program. According to the reporters, the trip to Sortavala was the high point and the culmination of the class. It was also noted that the trip was an event which was anticipated, but also feared.

An agreement was made with the students to use their reports as research material but to maintain anonymity. A common picture of this travelers’ community was formed by reading the contents of the travelogs thoroughly and creating a thematic file containing analytically chosen episodes and phrases. Phenomenological, ethnographical and narrative methods were applied in the documentary analysis of the data contained in the reports, which were neither public nor private entirely. In the process of qualitative meaning construction, as that grounded on documentary sources, the relationship between the authors, mediators and receivers of written messages is an important aspect. Scott (1990) emphasized that both intended meanings of the authors and received meanings of the readers of texts have to be reflexively understood in the semiotic analysis of personal documents (see also May 1997, 165–73). In this case, the researcher was not a participant observer but an interpreter of the travelers’ own observations. The access of the researcher to the situation in which evidence was collected was mediated as restricted and “fixed” to the contents of scripts and extracts (Scott 1990, 4–5). As Richardson (2003, 499–509) said, the researcher’s interests and ways of experiencing situations are also brought into the picture. As the voyeur’s gaze comes in and the interpretation becomes infused with a tone of an omnipotent narrator, the story becomes an irresistible object. This cross-border trip is seen as a group experience. The travelogs contained autobiographical elements and descriptions on socially situated experiences. When interpreting the experiences of the students, the researcher’s task was to find out what blinders the students were wearing and how what they saw fit in with what others saw. According to the biographical view, people’s lives are weaved from lived experiences like a tapestry. In the interpretation of data such as these, the illuminative power of personally said things is significant and descriptions of the events also reflect the life processes of the observers (see Lee 2000, 112; Roberts 2002; Scott 1990). Episodic observations of individual reporters are valuable as evidence for constructing a common picture as a socially meaningful composition.

Reliability of this kind of narration is difficult to guarantee, although results should be the sort that readers think to be reliable. The contents and quality of the travelogs varied, with the length of reports being
approximately 2–10 pages. Citations were not chosen based on the number of times they had been mentioned in the travelogs. In the analysis of the qualitative data, the frequency and significance of remarks are not considered to be the same, as Scott (1990, 32) remarked. It is sensible to distinguish exceptional comments from common attitudes, but the justification of the comparability of descriptive sayings demands contextual interpretation, and typologies tend to simplify the narrative contents of these scripts. Important aspects can either be characteristic or evolve in nuanced remarks.

Differences in living conditions between Finland and Russian Karelia were considered when analyzing as to how the anticipations of travelers were expressed and how they saw the reality of others. Descriptions of the specific meeting points during the trip formed the “scaffolding” (see Ackerley and True 2010, 183) for the construction of the travel narratives. Meaningful experiences formed a continuum shared by the student travelers. According to Schütz (1978 [1932]), a continuum such as this contains elements of the social world as experienced by oneself as well as seen by contemporaries. All the reports were considered for comparison and the generalizations were also compared with those of the reports from a corresponding study travel in the spring of 2008. The picture presented by the Russian society and atmosphere in Sortavala was seen similarly during both the trips, although the data from the trip in 2007 were clearly more illustrative. The reason for this was certainly that the students were instructed to make everyday observations. This idea guided the formation of the picture of how the reality there (Soja 2000, 11) was met, experienced and incorporated as a lived space, resulting from both perceived practices and conceived symbolic representations.

In the discursive content analysis of the data collected from the travel reports, processes of “restorying” and “cultural portraying” (Creswell 2007, 56, 72, 231) were applied. The event studied here contains both individual aspects and group experiences inside a special cultural context. Thus, the narration of the trip is a cultural representation. The event was first experienced by the students and then it was retold in their own words. The common story was modified by the researcher by reading and interpreting the contents of the travel reports. The interpretation starts from the experiences of the travelers in frames of the social setting and the structural context of the travel, as framed by the previous information about this situation and its placement. Finally, this cultural event is reflected by ideological border constructions, and each participant adds elements to the continuum of the narrative process, even the readers of this article.

Starting the Trip, Crossing the Border

The students began their trip with great curiosity, talking about how their minds were open and what they anticipated or how their feelings were mixed. Some of them had already imagined various situations and some said that they had no expectations at all. However, nobody faces any situations, even strange ones, without any preconceptions or not remembering anything. These students carried their previous knowledge, assumptions and prejudices with them while making their notes. Observations, experiences, interpretations and conclusions are based on what the students saw during the trip in the situations they encountered, with the framework planned beforehand as a part of the studies. The picture of Sortavala is not represented in a realistic light in the travelogs, but the contents of the observations are tinged by the ways the Social Policy trip was seen, such as charity tourism, civil activism or developmental optimism.

The participants of this study trip were no pilgrims nostalgic for Karelian roots like so many other travelers who were in search of their roots in the beginning of the 1990s, when the earlier closed border was opened to tourists (Ahponen 1996, 195–96; Paasi 1994, 34). They were certainly not neo-Karelians who wished to return to the lost Karelia with expectations and images of Karelia shaded by the memories and yearnings of their loss (cf. Fingerroos 2007, 18). Neither had they presented themselves as representatives of “neo-tribes” who try to find past cultural elements for performative use (see Fingerroos 2010, 157–59, 167–68). They were not crossing the border as traders, neither as conquerors nor as spies, but as curious learning tourists. They were out to study a new reality and open up their views on differences between societies. It was important for them to see how things look on the other side of the border and to get a feel
of what it is like to live there. Their intention was to use this learning experiment as a part of their studies. It might become a sociopolitical excursion, even in a sense not expected beforehand.

The students saw Sortavala as a part of current Russian Karelia, a place of others, separated from Finland by a fixed, strictly controlled border. They said that the formalities on the border took 2 h when getting into Russia and 2 min on the Finnish side. After all, the borders that separate nations and states from each other are not just concrete, physical formations. They are also imaginary, generally represented by many symbols that have to do with opening and closing (Brednikova 2000, 25–37). The students have learned that from a Finnish perspective, the part of Karelia which is on the other side of the border belongs to the past. It is a historical memory that “many people would like to reclaim and which was unjustly stolen from us.” In these images, Russian Karelia is situated somewhere in the middle of historical golden Karelia, fed by the Karelianist ideology, and the contemporary poor or miserable Karelia, separated from the western democracy by a gulf of income difference and unfair governance. One traveler described his expectations by noting that “when people go to Russia, they move their clocks one hour forwards and thirty years backwards.” Descriptions of what was seen beyond the border could have sarcastic overtones: “soon, we crossed the border to the Russian side, and had a chance to admire the paving, which was filled with holes, as well as all the rundown wooden houses, not forgetting the empty stores.”

The first impressions of the scenery dwell on the landscape of the otherness, which was considered to be miserable and sad—muddy roads, rundown shacks and deserted dwellings. The students wondered whether the people living in these houses are as careless about their own environment as these first impressions would make it seem. Once the travelers got to Sortavala, the “uncleanliness of the city’s exterior was immediately evident.” This commonly shared remark, though, was contrasted with “clean interiors, concealed by the rough-hewn exterior.” Sortavala came across as “simultaneously a poor and wonderful place.” The people, with their everyday affairs, seemed to be happy. All this made one traveler wonder whether “people stripped of material possessions really have some inherent quality that makes them better at enjoying life itself.”

The students noted how they, just being Finns, differed from the locals due to their dress and behavior. They looked at the local women, so well dressed that, compared with the Finns, “all the Russian women look like they are going to a party.” Their notes also show how the context of the pre-assumptions influenced the observations:

> When I walk on the street, everyone here seems to know that I’m Finnish, and I don’t even have to say anything. I wonder how this can be, and start to pay more attention to my behavior and clothing. I realize that I’m a rich Westerner, and as such an excellent target for a mugger. (Learning diaries)

Of course, many also noted that during such a short visit, they had to depend a lot on guesses confused with first impressions.

**Prescient Frames of Charity**

The students’ own situational behavior was an element in the interpretation, and it also reflected in their previous impressions and knowledge of the societal situation in trans-border Karelia. The trip made them think about how well seeing Russia physically and having a peek under the badly kept surface fit in with their Social Policy studies, realized here as *praxis*.

Charity was an essential element in justifying the trip. Local conditions should be improved “as many things are not as they should be beyond the border. Helping is important, though not always easy.” Civil activities were thought to be a method of influencing the living conditions and environment so that ordinary people could live better. It was proposed that Russia should be helped in building a strong civil society, as it is impossible to build a future and a better life for all the people without civil activities. It was
also noted that paying attention to cleanliness and satisfaction costs nothing. These suggestions for improving Karelian society had strong moralistic overtones, whether the writers intended it or not.

Social care characterized the situations encountered during the trip. Events were realized through the interpreters’ feelings and also attitudes, adopted beforehand about the destination, influenced by the way the Social Policy class served as a context for the trip. The students had visited the office of Karjalan Apu (Karelian Aid), a charity organization, established in 1998 in Joensuu to give aid to poor people in Russian Karelia. On its internet site, Karjalan Apu presents itself as a voluntary organization without any religious or political ties, “channeling and transporting humanitarian and material help to Russian Karelia.” (see Karjalan apu ry). The students received information about Sortavala in Karjalan Apu, and this influenced their pre-assumptions. It was made clear that Karelians need help because their living conditions have grown worse. Obviously, many inhabitants of Karelia acutely needed aid, but Karjalan Apu, too, because of its nature of operations, required sympathy from potential benefactors to continue its charity operations. Attitudes were confused and mixed. A student talked about the information that she received:

What they told us about Karelia’s situation amazed us. I had previously known that the Finnish–Russian border had had the largest income disparity in the world once, but that this was true even today? On the other hand, the article “Who is poor in Russia?,” which we read, was about how there are large income disparities between different areas of Russia. According to that article, Republic of Karelia was worse off than many other areas, especially in the field of education. This information went hand in hand with what Karjalan Apu told us about Sortavala’s school system. The fact is that there’s not much money to be made from education. (…) Apparently the taxation regime in Russia doesn’t work, because certain areas, which don’t have industry or natural resources, have been completely passed over by the central government. Considering all this I wondered—if Karelia was such a burden to the Russian government, why couldn’t they return it to Finland? (Learning diaries)

Many students wrote about the role of Karjalan Apu in Russian aid in their travelogs. One remark was that “there’s a need for more aid organizations like Karjalan Apu, because we can’t turn our backs to those who need our aid.” On the other hand, someone asked if “there wasn’t something else Karjalan Apu could do besides transporting Finnish leftovers over the border to the needy,” because this sort of “typical developmental aid work never ends unless the bigger inherent problems are dealt with.” The aid process was explained to the students, step by step, as well as why the aid was given, but someone wanted to learn more about the criteria of aid: who proposes the aid targets, how long the targets are given aid and how many aid targets can there be at a time.

**Touching Sortavala**

When the students interpreted how they faced Sortavala, they used different rhetorical means. Positive and negative experiences during the visit were compared with pre-expectations. The notes, covered with romanticism, contained questions such as whether “people are better able to enjoy their lives when they have less material goods.” On the other hand, there was some nihilistic befuddlement about how “people can live by selling stuff on the marketplace when nothing costs anything.” Some situations were described like dramas—either realistically or poetically. Travelers who imagined that Sortavala is a small idyllic peasant town where things would be like they are in Finland experienced a culture shock. Reactions were emotional—people viewed misery with pity, but also wondered how surprisingly good some other things were. The city itself might look “beautiful even though it’s in shambles, in a unique, picturesque way.” This was influenced by how beautiful old wooden houses had been spared, though their upkeep was sadly neglected. When these comparisons about the similarities and differences were made with Finland, the students started to question as to whether what we consider good is really better than what Russians do.
They looked at windows and had a sudden flash of realization that “someone really lives here, eats supper and watches news from TV, in the middle of all these worn-out buildings.”

The emotions of these students are comparable to those recorded in the notes of other commentators on concerns about the state of Sortavala. A nostalgic visitor who prepared for the trip accompanied by a poet who was born in Sortavala talked about her disappointments in lieu of the poetical expectations:

When arrived there, my first feeling was shock. The city was poor, dark, and very rundown. I couldn’t find food anywhere and the inhabitants were mostly aged and weak. Even those who were better off were waiting for the food to arrive, even after the Soviet rule had ended. Our search for the Sortavala seminary came to an end because the roads were undrivable. The rain poured down from the heavens and prevented us from taking an island trip. I wished to leave Sortavala as soon as possible. I felt that this was something that most of the locals who were able to do so had already done so. (see Fingerroos and Loipponen 2007, 88)

A newspaper article about a Finnish–Russian forum on the border discussed how Sortavala represents the images of both miserable and golden Karelia. A participant working in a caterpillar company felt that the development of the area had been abandoned and there was a lot of work to be done in improving the exterior of the city:

Houses of Sortavala are in a bad shape and the streets resemble a potato field. All the running water should go through the new purifier, and the water pipes in general need fixing. Russia spends all of its oil income on St. Petersburg and Moscow and lets the other places manage on their own.

But another interviewee, belonging to Sortavala’s tourism organization, defended environmental tourism as the future of Karelia and wished to preserve the ecological urban milieu: “Buildings are like pearls and we don’t want to lose them. Our town just doesn’t have enough money to keep them in a good shape” (Newspaper Karjalainen 2008).

It is essential to find out firsthand how difficult it is for a visitor to get in touch with the local reality. The students found a foreigner in themselves, although they wanted to feel familiar as invited guests:

Suddenly I realized how much of a tourist I was. I really felt I needed to get off this pre-assigned role and get to know the ordinary people of Sortavala—if I had dared, I would have gone to the house next door and rang someone’s bell. (Learning diaries)

On the other hand, when giving practical suggestions for making the local things better, the students criticized the town for not investing enough in tourism: “Sortavala should make use of its beautiful nature and offer more help to the travelers, so that rich Russians would make their trips to Karelia instead of Finland.”

Getting to Know the Locality

After the students reached Sortavala, the hosts gave them a friendly reception and they settled into a hotel. The hotel was quite clean, even if “the renovation in process was somewhat annoying and the lobby’s electric table had threatening exposed cords.” One reporter was suspicious about how well the laws were obeyed: “Did the hotel really have a permit to keep its doors open while the renovation was going on, even though there were no guarantees for the security of the inhabitants?” Inside the rooms, the beds were hard and there was little sound isolation. But at least the window boards were wonderfully wide. The hotel disco was stocked with “all even slightly wealthy pensioners of the town” who clearly were “enjoying the breathtaking atmosphere,” as a reporter writes satirically.
The travel destinations included school nr. 3, the city hall and a children’s home. A visit to the women’s organization Nadezda was also planned, but had to be cancelled. Nadezda has been a partner of Karjalan Apu in its effort to build safe houses for women and children. It also participates in the sexual health care of the youth. The students wished to see in practice how aid processes operate from the perspective of a Russian NGO. The students depended on Karjalan Apu’s presentation for their views about the need for social aid and the people who needed it.

Even before the trip, school nr. 3 had been an aid target for the student association of the University of Joensuu. The students had been instructed to donate craft supplies, copy paper, math books and money for a new toilet seat. The school had a stripped-down exterior and was old fashioned, but the interior was nice, colorful and enjoyable. The smell was somewhat weird to the observers. But the school had just obtained a grant for new supplies and the new computers made an impression on the students: “Many were awed by the school’s up-to-date computer class, which was better equipped than many Finnish computer classes.” The principal described about the education system in great detail to the visitors. Because of the lack of space, the school operated in two shifts. According to the students, the children were happy, well behaved and excited. The day of the visit was not a usual school day—the spring vacation was about to begin and the pupils were cleaning up their school.

The city hall was situated in a beautiful stone building, and the visitors were briefed about the city government by “some female government official.” The visitors did not think that they got a particularly good idea as to how the city government functioned. They were requested to ask questions, but were answered choosily. The students were also requested to make suggestions about how to offer better support to youth programs. The general impression was that the visit only scratched the surface of the governance because the official notes lacked practical knowledge and contained only a little about everyday problems. However, that was what the students wanted to know about.

The visit to the children’s home elicited two kinds of reactions. The children’s home was better than expected—it generally looked enjoyably domestic and the children were neatly dressed and seemed to be well balanced. The children’s personal rooms were noted to be decorated as if they really are and gave the impression that they really were inhabited. The students criticized the way this visit was arranged and many suspected that this was an organized presentation, with the children being treated like tour sights. Still, they thought that it was good to see the children’s situation because “everyone remembered the tales from the Karjalan Apu’s leader” about social security practices in Russia. The visitors got confused when their preconceived attitudes were tested through their position and moral considerations as tourists:

The orphanage as a tour spot caused mixed feelings: Some felt that we shouldn’t just go look at the orphans like they were animals at a circus. (Learning diaries)

Many hoped that the inhabitants of the children’s home could be met in a more relaxed atmosphere during the next visit—the students might challenge the older children to a football match, for instance. But children were also seen to be happy to respond to the questions. One commentator remarked that “they have dreams like we do, even though their lives had started out so differently.” What got the visitors’ attention were the photos in the lobby with the text “we are proud of them”, which displayed the former inhabitants who had succeeded in their lives. These photos made one student to think about the conditions under which one gets his or her picture on that wall and to hope that the wall had photos of really happy and well-succeeded forerunners whose footsteps the children could follow.

Two Different Societies in a World of Inequalities

The travelers were startled by the differences in two societies separated by a common border:

Even though Russia is next door and there’s only a little way to travel from Joensuu, we rarely think how different our two neighboring cultures are. (Learning diaries)
Finland has alcoholics, gimmick shops and rundown cars, but the travelers saw that underage drunks, Ladas used as taxis, smoking indoors and the Russian habit of putting every marketable good on display made the negative things in Russian life glaringly obvious. To some visitors, the main impression was one of poverty and misery, whereas others thought about the chasm between the rich and the poor, and still for others, the people themselves were rather indecipherable. Nevertheless, the school seemed charming in its colorfulness and the nostalgic wooden houses “reminded us of old Finnish village schools from past decades.” In this way, the visitors transported themselves into an imaginary, stereotypical past “of us” to compare familiar and foreign features across the border.

The travel reports showed how obvious it is to consider one’s own culture as superior at first. The familiar culture was seen as a part of the dominant European civilization, and then it was realized how truly important it was to see another model as an option. The students writing these reports thought that one could possibly raise questions regarding his or her perceptions of goodness by comparing his or her everyday life with different standards. One writer who considered this ended up saying that it is idiotic to go abroad and think that nothing is going to be different. Some proposals for making a difference were certainly far too wide reaching and exaggerated. The students also noted that unlike what they had expected, things seemed to be good enough in some of the tour destinations, like the school and the children’s home—“especially when considering that there’s probably not too much money available to develop either of them.”

Things become real to us when we see, hear and experience them, and our sense of proportionality grows in comparison.

During this visit I remembered what I saw during my Russian trip ten years back—all the ragged, begging street children—but this time I saw none. (Learning diaries)

This was said by a traveler with a previous Russian experience. Another world traveler made a comparison based on a far-off experience: “Everything was in shambles, small and thickly built. I felt the same as I did when I saw the Tanzanian slums.”

When people travel to tourist hotspots which are meant to be enjoyable, the other locales present themselves in a performative way, as a show for their viewers (Urry 2007, 268–69). The character of the destination, the way the trip emerges and the expectations of the travelers all play their part in how the travel experiences turn out. Do people look for an adventure, are they spurred by curiosity or the enjoyment produced by these experiences? Are they searching for something unusual, something that will serve as a counterpoint to the stability of their everyday life? For these student travelers, this was not a package tour taken solely for entertainment, but it still offered them a new, touching experience. It was a successful learning experience because after returning home, “we could appreciate the orderliness of Finnish life and understood more about Russia and its people.” The trip was justified in its ability in making the students more aware of the Russian conditions in practice. Critical thoughts were also expressed about the trip: “giving us more viewpoints would have been a good addition.” In particular, the students wanted to know more about the Russian NGOs and to know the opinions of the local youth. Income differences in Russia did not feature in many comments, and neither did the lifestyle of the Russian nouveau riche, even when compared with the lives of the ordinary people in Sortavala. Someone, though, noted that the contrast with Finland was great and the difference between the rich and the poor inside Russia was enormous. This conclusion is supported by a remark that “as far as I know, there is no middle class to speak of in Russia.”

To most of the visitors, the main impression was one of cultural differences and misery. Others thought the trip to be a great experience and hoped that more trips like this would be organized, but still others said that they would never return. One traveler who first made a note about how his worldview was opened felt that
I couldn’t say that I’m in love with this culture or country. The difference between our cultures didn’t excite me, just made me miserable, and I don’t believe I’ll visit Sortavala or Russia ever again. (Learning diaries)

Another one thought about possibly working in Russian Karelia in the future: “This is a strange country, but I guess I’d get used to it. All the uncertainty of it—these people have got used to it, after all.” A commentator, who said that everything was “topsy-turvy,” had similar thoughts:

In Sortavala, I thought about all the things that were topsy-turvy, but why shouldn’t the world be imperfect—who says all the streets and roads should be without holes? Maybe, with more time, I could have noticed all the good things instead of all the faults. I would have liked to spend another few days in Sortavala to fully understand the place and how anyone can live there. (Learning diaries)

According to some, the perspective could turn upside down upon returning home:

I couldn’t help but notice how drab everything looks here, in the middle of all this gunk. And the buildings are not in prime shape, either—and furthermore, all the beautiful old buildings are completely missing. Suddenly, Sortavala actually felt beautiful. (Learning diaries)

The notes highlighted the nature of developmental aid from a general perspective: “Aiding a foreign country always has its problems, such as how to do it without making the recipients feel like they’re lower in status.” The trip made some students think as to whether it would be possible to build possibilities for the less fortunate according to the hoe and seeds principle. Certainly, in Sortavala’s home gardens, the hoe and seeds principle is already in good use. A characteristic sociopolitical comment was whether Russian economic growth and use of natural resources would ever get to the level that some of the money got past the mouth of the capitalists. Some students thought as to “how hard it is to make changes to social system when one line of thinking has gone on unchallenged for such a long time.” Optimistic attitudes and willingness of the people to change the worse things for the better were considered to be good. One student commented about the differences public power operation in Russia and Finland and made a suggestion for more practical ways of co-operation, which could benefit both the partners in neighborly co-operations at the grassroots level.

Information gathering, comparing experiences and testing prejudices were important reasons for organizing this trip across the border. Other reasons were creating common spirit and strengthening the identity of the student group. The Finnishness of the students was emphasized in their sense of togetherness: “We were all in the same boat, strangers in a strange land.” This common spirit included experiencing the locality of this community. The way these travelers acted away from home is far removed from the description of postmodern tourist space by Bauman (1996, 277), where people are “tourists always and everywhere, acting like they’re at home everywhere, but not coming from anywhere.” On returning from the trip, students still wondered how different the world was just an hour’s travel from their home. But their sense of relativity and skills of realizing new experiences and living conditions were improved.

Conclusions: The Other Karelia Revisited

When analyzing the Karelian “reality,” the student travelers were learning tourists. Their expectations can be compared with the prospects of neo-Karelians who have sought their roots nostalgically from the “lost” Karelia. Pilgrimages are colored by blue yearning, golden memories and rosy hopes. Urry (1990) described tourists’ wishes to experience phenomena which make trips special and which are different from their everyday life context. In these travel reports, curious commentators looked at the landscape, buildings and roads on the other side of the border and the general atmosphere of Sortavala through
Finnish eyes. They compared the economic situation, social problems and cultural differences with their own Western context, formed by lessons from history and Social Policy. They made guesses about the direction of Karelian development and offered suggestions about fixing up Russian Karelia. From the way they wrote about Russian Karelia, one could think that all the comparable problems in Finland are solved through the means of welfare.

It is known that if an unfamiliar community does not correspond with our everyday reality, we tend to cover the “reality of the others” with prejudices, hearsay and imaginary characters of strangers. To the students, the border between Finland and Russia came across as a border of sociocultural otherness. The special context of this study trip was related to the sociopolitical program of these student travelers. This aspect influenced the way the students saw the others’ situation through their own life context. Being students, these young people were eager to learn to see things differently than what they had done earlier, also by comparing their expectations with the experiences they had gained during this border-crossing process. This element may be present in any tourist trip. But learners will have meaningful experiences to increase their awareness of different realities. Sustainability of their own perceptions is tested through barriers crossed during the trip.

This short visit was packaged for students. It did not include direct and informal contacts with the local people. The students did not overcome the language barrier and neither did they have face-to-face meetings with the locals. The outsiders’ expressions of being foreigners are illustrative but contain elements of surrealism. Certainly, this border-crossing experience increased the students’ awareness of their own situation and opened their eyes to see differences. The observations are framed by their pre-expectations of whether they expected to see a miserable or golden Karelia, but their previous travel experiences and their worldview also influenced how they saw Sortavala across the border. The context of comparisons is also set by how well the students were informed about the Russian society. Observed situations were reasoned in sociopolitical frames by charity tourism, civil activism or developmental optimism.

The students went a step further in trying to understand similarities and differences between life models. This served as a lesson in becoming conscious about the conceptions, expectations and prejudices concerning otherness. Travelers’ considerations of the feelings of otherness reflect upon isolation as an essential aspect of alienation. In alienated conditions, a society’s access to resources is restricted (Kalekin-Fishman 1996, 97), like freedom to move in and out, when strictly controlled borders separate people from each other inside blocked societies. In today’s societies, where border-crossings are more and more likely to be everyday experiences, a demand to become aware of the other side of alienation is increasing. Identities of flexible and movable wanderers remain rootless if cross-border experiences have no meaningful location.

We easily construct biased conceptions of strangers and the others and label them “aliens” and “enemies” without overcoming the borders that separate them from us. Togetherness of a group “sailing in a same boat” can strengthen the feelings of sameness but also give the power to meet new situations and reconstruct social identities. Cultural imagination helps us see the differences and the similarities between familiar situations and the placements of unknown others. Cultural practices as lived experiences are tools for crossing borders between our imagined cultural identity and the imagined otherness.

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Endnotes
1 According to the 2002 Census, about 10% of the population of Russian Karelia was calculated to belong to this group.
2 The University of Eastern Finland was formed in 2010 when the University of Joensuu and the University of Kuopio united. The number of students in the four faculties of this new university is nearly 14,000.

3 The contents of the class were the responsibility of the tutor students. The course had a teacher in charge of the group, but during this trip, the teacher did not have any role.

4 Visits to Joensuu and its environs offered possibilities to see how local businesses operated and to become acquainted with civic institutes and some administration services.

5 Ethnography refers usually to participant observations of the researcher. Here, the reporters of travelogues applied auto-ethnographical writing in their learning diaries, which were used here as the research data. An ethnographic aspect in the analysis is that the experiences of both the researcher and the researched group were included in the validation of the remarked experiences. In more general terms, we can speak of participatory action research (Ackerley and True 2010, 202, 214–15; Scott 1990).

6 The pronouns she and he are used at random when needed as markers of the sex of the students.

7 The name of the student organization of the social policy students is Praxis.

8 Other elements of alienation, as defined by Seeman (1976), are meaninglessness, lack of contents, instrumentalism and powerlessness.

References


**Data**

