Small stories, trivial events and strong emotions

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Small stories, trivial events – and strong emotions.
Local event narratives in hand-written newspapers
as negotiation of individual and collective experiences

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Abstract. How can one capture emotions and embodied experiences in historical archival material? I will approach this methodological challenge from the perspectives of folklore studies, narrative and historical research. The sources for reaching these experiences and emotions are hand-written newspapers, which were a popular tradition in Finnish student organisations and popular movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. My special interest lies in local event narratives that depict recent events in local communities: meetings, trips, social evenings and informal gatherings. According to my observations, local event narratives can express hidden tensions and slow historical processes, which are rather acted out in apparently trivial events of everyday life than formulated in ideological statements.

In the analysis of local event narratives I have been inspired by the narrative methodology oriented towards “small stories” developed by Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Georgakopoulou 2007; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). The focus of the research on small stories is on how people use stories in everyday situations “to create a sense of who they are”. Small stories can also be called “narratives-in-interaction”, which Bamberg and Georgakopoulou define as “the sites of engagement where identities are continuously practised and tested out” (2008, 378–379). Modified for historical archive materials the small stories methodology provides possibilities for innovative new readings. In this article I will examine the possibility of developing a more fine-grained analytical model, including analysis of narrative interaction by applying Erving Goffman’s (1981) terminology.

I will present my methodological observations with examples of my research materials: the temperance society, known as Tähti (“The Star”) in Helsinki in the 1890s; and the agrarian youth society of Hiirola in eastern Finland during the first decade of the 20th century. I compare my research
findings with two studies on narrative strategies in letters and diaries from the same period, written by Martyn Lyons (2013) and Andrew Hassam (1994).

How can one capture emotions and embodied experiences in historical archive materials? This methodological challenge has been approached by researchers working on historical archival materials called "ego-documents" or "life writing", including autobiographies, correspondence and private diaries. Martyn Lyons emphasises the role of ego-documents in identity formation: autobiographies of 19th-century workers "forged an identity that was both individual and class based" (2013, 17). However, Lyons points out that writing in the 19th century was "rarely private", but rather was very often shared with other people, read aloud or circulated within the family or community.

The focus of this article is on narrating collective experiences of everyday life in the past. Sources for reaching these experiences are hand-written newspapers, which were a popular tradition in Finnish schools, families, student organisations, and popular movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were most often produced as one single manuscript copy, and published by being read out aloud at meetings and get-togethers. The collective editorial process meant that many people participated in the creation of individual texts. Hand-written newspapers provide excellent material for studying everyday negotiations on identity and power in historical contexts (Salmi-Niklander 2004; 2005; 2006; 2009; 2011; 2013a; 2013b; 2014).

The term ego-document is hardly apt to hand-written newspapers because writers only rarely depicted their individual experiences and emotions, and the identity of individual writers was in most cases hidden behind pseudonyms. However, hand-written newspapers fit into the category of "ordinary writings", coined by Lyons (2013, 13–14) and based on the term écritures ordinaires by Daniel Fabre (1993). Ordinary writings cover various genres of texts written by people from the rural population and the working classes with little or no formal education.

Lyons points out that ordinary writings reveal the emotions and experience of their writers to only a limited extent: "Proletarian writings were characteristically laconic, pragmatic, concerned more with the price of essential goods than with personal feelings" (2013, 17).

Different observations have been made by other researchers of ordinary writings. The Finnish historian Kaisa Kauranen (2009, 11–14) has observed emotional expressions in diaries written by lower-class men (peasant freeholders, crofters and landless farm workers) in 19th-century rural Finland. In Sweden, most of the peasant journals were matter-of-fact reports of farm work and the weather,
whereas in Finland many writers openly discussed emotions surrounding unhappy love or the death of a child.

Writers of hand-written newspapers utilised a great variety of genres and motifs adopted from printed literature as well as the press and oral tradition. My interest focuses on local event narratives, which along with parodic news and advertisements are genres typical to hand-written newspapers. They depict recent events in local communities: meetings, trips, social evenings and informal gatherings. According to my observations, local event narratives can express hidden tensions and slow historical processes, which are acted out in the apparently trivial events of everyday life rather than formulated in ideological statements. Common narrative strategies can be outlined in local event narratives in spite of their different historical and social contexts.

The narrative methodology oriented towards “small stories” developed by Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Georgakopoulou 2007; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) has provided new insight into the analysis of local event narratives in hand-written newspapers. I will explore the benefits of applying small-stories methodology to narratives in hand-written newspapers. How does this methodology promote deeper understanding of everyday narrative interaction?

Small stories methodology in the analysis of local event narratives

In folklore studies, the “personal experience narrative” has been defined as a genre of oral narration that does not fit into the traditional folkloristic genres. Sandra K. Dolby (2008 [1989], 15–16) defines personal experience narrative as a prose narrative referring to a personal experience, told in the first person and with untraditional content. Moreover, she argues that personal experience narratives have a dramatic narrative structure, the truth of the narrative is consistently implied and the teller of the story is identical with the narrator (op cit, 18–19).

The local event narratives that I have observed in hand-written newspapers, are in many ways different from personal experience narratives as depicted by Stahl: their plots are usually simple and undramatic, and it is difficult to apply William Labov’s narrative approach in their analysis: complicating action, which according to Labov is an essential story component, is often lacking in these stories (Labov 1972; Patterson 2008, 26). Instead of individual experiences these narratives focus on collective action.

Although local event narratives follow the literary models of parallel genres in printed newspapers, they take a parodic distance to these models. The literary style in local event narratives varies from matter-to-fact reports to a collective
stream of consciousness, in which even the narrator seems to be unaware of what is going to happen next. First person plural (the narrative we) is much more common in local event narratives than first person singular (the narrative I). An omniscient narrator appears in many local event narratives, in which the narrator predicts events or describes emotions, even the dreams of the characters – even though these characters would be real people living in the same community with the writer. I have also observed the use of the unreliable narrator in some local event narratives, which I have called “pseudo-personal-experience-narratives”: the unreliability of the narrator is pointed out by his/her ignorance or dubious morals (Salmi-Niklander 2004, 165–166, 174; 2007, 204–205).

The narrative methodology oriented towards small stories has challenged Labovian narrative theory. Instead of studying narratives as representations of worlds and identities, the focus of small stories research is on how people use stories in everyday situations “to create a sense of who they are” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 382). Small stories can also be outlined as “narratives-in-interaction”, which Bamberg and Georgakopoulou define “as the sites of engagement where identities are continuously practised and tested out” (op cit, 378–379).

Small stories methodology comes close to my own observations on local event narratives, even though Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, 385) base their methodological observations on contemporary interview materials. Small stories can be about very recent or still unfolding events, events that may or may not have actually happened, and they can even be “stories about nothing” (op cit, 381–382; Georgakopoulou 2007, viii). I recognise parallel features in the local event narratives in historical archive materials: meta-narratives in which the narrators attempt to tell a coherent story or to find a suitable subject for a story, but do not succeed. And this is not because of their lacking literary skills, since often these “pseudo-personal-experience-narratives” are told in quite coherent and elaborate language.

Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, 379) have framed the micro-analysis of small stories as “a window into the micro-genetic processes of identities as ‘in-the-making’ or ‘coming-into-being’”. Applying the small stories methodology to local event narratives in hand-written newspapers, one of my main questions is: Is it possible to reach the narrative interaction and everyday practices of identity work, if I only have fragmentary literary documents available and cannot interview the people who have created them? In many cases I don't even know who they are and if the clues they have given me about their identity and the events would be misleading. However, studying these small clues can provide access to narrative interaction.
One of the key terms in Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s analysis is positioning, which takes place on three different levels. The first level of positioning is related to the story: How characters in the story are positioned in relation to each other, space and time? The second level of positioning is divided into three sublevels, focusing on (1) the interactional accomplishment of narrating, (2) interaction in an interview situation and (3) joint interactional engagement. The third level of positioning is related to participants’ construction of each other in terms of teller roles (op cit, 385).

Based on the methodological observations of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, I have outlined a three-phase model of analysis for local event narratives. I focus on (1) the content of the narrative (characters, events, time and place, means of narration), (2) on the processes of text production, interaction publishing and authorship and (3) on the relations of the narrative with historical events, ideologies and master narratives (Salmi-Niklander 2009).

To approach the narrative interaction in small stories, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou adopted Erving Goffman’s (1981) terminology of narrative interaction, which outlines the roles of “the author”, “the animator” and “the principal”. The author selects the sentiments that are being expressed (op cit, 144), the animator is “the talking machine, the thing that sounds come out of” (op cit, 167), and the principal “believes personally in what is being said” (op cit, 167).

In this article I will examine the possibilities of developing a more fine-grained analytical model of local event narratives, including the analysis of narrative interaction with Goffman’s terms. This analysis provides great challenges in the study of archival materials, since I cannot observe the narrative interaction that has taken place in the creation of individual texts. However, some traces of this interaction can be observed in the texts and other archival sources.

In hand-written newspapers, several people participated in the creation of a single text: it was first submitted by the original author, then revised by the editor, and finally published by being read aloud by the reader. Collective negotiation took place in this process, which was only documented on some special occasions when disagreements arose about special texts. For example, the editor could refuse to read a text out if he or she could not accept its content (Salmi-Niklander 2011, 32–33).

Relating the writing process of hand-written newspapers with Goffman’s terms, the original writer of the text is the author, and the person who reads the text aloud to the audience could be called the animator. The principal is a more complex term: in some cases the principal comes close to the editor and the author, but sometimes the principal is a fictional construct, and the narrator is unreliable.
Urban and rural conversation communities

Hand-written newspapers originated among the educated elite. During the 17th and the 18th centuries, they served as an important alternative medium in many European countries, distributing revolutionary ideas (Love 1993; Darnton 2000). In Finland, they were revitalised by Finnish students in the early 1850s, when student activities were under the strong control of Czar Nicholas the First and his officialdom, after the revolutionary year of 1848 (Klinge 1967, 11, 135–137). During the last decades of the 19th century, hand-written newspapers were adopted by temperance movement and the agrarian youth movement (Karppio 1938, 449–450; Numminen 1961, 459–471). The heyday of this tradition was the first decades of the 20th century, when it served as a political medium during the periods of russification and in the rising labour movement.

I will analyse local event narratives written by young men and women in two conversational communities in the late 19th and early 20th century. These two case studies provide insight into discussions and tensions among urban and rural young people. The first example is the conversational club of the temperance society known as Tähti (’The Star’) in Helsinki. It was a meeting place for men and women as well as for members of different social classes. The society belonged to a nation-wide organisation, Raittiuden Ystävät (’The Friends of Temperance’), which was established in 1883. The number of members varied between 100 and 200 during the 1890s. The society produced a hand-written newspaper, Kehitys, with ca 500 pages written during the years 1891–1893 that has been preserved at the National Library (Salmi-Niklander 2005; 2006).

Kehitys was edited by young male students and artisans who discussed the temperance ideology as well as philosophical and scientific matters. The Finnish historian Irma Sulkunen (1986) has outlined the temperance ideology in late 19th-century Finland as a new “religion of citizenship” that looked for alternatives to the Christian worldview. The writers of Kehitys wanted to create a synthesis of Christianity, ideals for self-education and new achievements within the natural sciences.

It is difficult to identify the individual writers of Kehitys since the minutes have not been preserved and most texts were written anonymously or under pseudonyms, which was a common practice in the publication of hand-written newspapers. Many established pen names can be observed in Kehitys, including Draba Verna and Voima (’Force’). Many writers used their initials as pen names, a common practice in nineteenth-century printed newspapers.

My other case study is Virittäjä, the hand-written newspaper of the Hiirola agrarian youth society. Hiirola was a small village in eastern Finland, close to the
Local event narratives in hand-written newspapers

city of Mikkeli. Farms were scattered around a small railway station; a limestone quarry and some small limestone factories provided employment (Laitinen 1992, 477). The birth of the agrarian youth society was closely connected with the period of russification at the turn of the 20th century. The members included farm workers and the offspring of land-owning families and crofters. The house of Mikko Savander, a farmer and a lay assessor, became a second home for young members of the society, and her daughter Elin was one of the most active members. The first members (10 men and 6 women) remained active in the society for more than twenty years. During the years 1906–1908 the number of members increased to 55. New members were recruited among young people from crofter families and farm servants (Salmi-Niklander 2013a, 83).

The hand-written newspaper Virittäjä was produced collectively, and all the texts are anonymous or pseudonymous. Each issue was edited by a team of four to six young men and women, but nobody was named editor-in-chief. Some members of the editorial team were changed in each issue, and their names were in most cases mentioned on the front page. The editorial process is quite different from Kehitys, in which some active writers dominated the paper, even though they most often hid their identity behind pseudonyms.

I will compare my research findings with two studies on narrative strategies in letters and diaries from the same time period, late 19th and early 20th century. Martyn Lyons (2013) has analysed letters and diaries written by French, Italian and Spanish soldiers from the front during World War I. Letters depict experiences, which are loaded with strong emotions and physical experiences related with death, pain, fatigue, hunger and thirst. However, both the wartime censorship, literary conventions and limited writing competence of the authors set limits on the expression of these emotions. Lyons points out that correspondence was “a highly ritualized and codified form of communication” (2013, 77); both emigrant and soldier letters rather resembled general newsletters than private correspondence. Humour and trench slang were important means of expressing wartime experience in soldiers’ letters. Quite a few soldiers kept diaries at the front: many of them had short entries recording immediate experiences and soldiers’ repetitive tasks (op cit, 59–61).

Another example of the research of narrative strategies in historical materials is Andrew Hassam’s Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants (1994). Hassam observes narrative strategies in shipboard diaries: how did emigrant diarists create personas for themselves, and how did they fill their diaries “when there was nothing to write about”? The diary was an attempt to construct the voyage experience (Hassam 1994, 4). The voyage to Australia set a frame for the narrative, with a beginning, a middle and an end.
The voyage was a great experience demarcating a turning point in writers’ life stories. However, on board days could be quite undramatic and uneventful. This promoted detailed observations of fellow passengers and the spatial exclusions between different classes of passengers (op cit, 120–123), although many diaries are quite monotonous and formulaic (op cit, 75–76). The basic entry in an emigrant diary is “a nautical entry”, recording the wind and the weather (op cit, 98–99).

Hassam (op cit, 41) points out that there were two types of emigrant diaries: some of them were copied and sent back home to relatives, while some writers kept diaries only for themselves. The act of promising to keep a diary was an important part of emigrant culture; most often the mother was the addressee of the diary. Sometimes the diary would already be copied on the boat, but more typically after landing (op cit, 30–33). However, it is difficult to read the purpose of the diary in the text: even though many diaries are not openly addressed to other people, this does not indicate that they would have been private diaries. Hassam analyses self-consciousness in shipboard diaries: occasions on which “a diarist becomes aware of her or himself as a narrator” (op cit, 154), when he or she is “faced by the repetition” (op cit, 154) during the uneventful days on shipboard. This process opens a gap between the diarist as a narrator and his/her public persona. In diaries, self-consciousness is expressed as references to the writing process: the time and place and difficulties of writing (op cit, 154–157).

Urban stories: meetings and gymnastics

I will present two examples of local event narratives from both Kehitys and Virit-täjä, which highlight the tensions between individual and collective perspectives in these communities of young people. The first text was published in Kehitys in January 1893, entitled “Features on young people’s lives” as the first part of a series of similar stories. I have not been able to identify the writer, who uses the initials F. W. and was obviously a young man. In this case, the author is quite clearly individual, and probably his identity has been recognised by readers and listeners to this story and other members of the community.

However, in the story the narrator never uses the word “I” nor refers to his/her own emotions and experiences. The story provides quite a typical example of a merging we-narrator: the narrator merges into a group of young people, men and women by using the first person plural or the passive tense.

It was a beautiful winter evening. The earth was covered with a few inches of new snow, and the weather was not very cold. We were a large group of
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young people sitting in a meeting. The spirits were quite low, since here and there somebody opened their mouths wider than usual and the others looked frequently at their watches. The meeting seemed to last longer than usually, but finally it was over, and it was over 10.30 p.m. A little before the meeting was ended, the young people rushed out making a lot of noise. Little by little we gather on the pavement, where we have a little meeting without paying attention to the pedestrians, who have to creep in the sewer to get by. This time when the ardour was at its height, a voice was heard above others saying: “Wouldn’t you all agree with my suggestion?” (Kehitys, January 1893).

The variation of past and present tenses is typical to local event narratives: the reader (or the listener) gets the impression of immediate events, as if even the narrator would not know what would happen next. The lively group of young people occupies the street and the other pedestrians have to “creep in the sewer” to get by. One of them (probably a young man) whose words are cited suggests that they all would accompany home miss Ida X, who lives a few kilometres outside the city border. The spontaneous walking tour is described in such detail that I have been able to estimate that Miss Ida X, the only named and individualised person in the story, lived near Annala manor in eastern Helsinki.

The tour proceeds quite slowly, since as soon as they get outside the town gates they start a popular party game in the snow (leskisillä), because “nobody wanted to walk without a companion.” They meet a group of Salvation Army soldiers and a policeman. The narrator merges to the collective emotions of the group: “Now we forgot all the troubles and the reprimand we would get at home for a late arrival, it was most important that we had fun now” (op cit). Then it turns out that the group is not quite unanimous: the young men would like to go on with the party games but the women start to be tired. Only at the end of the story does the narrator reveal that he is a man, but this only in relation to the collective of “male human beings” who decide to accompany all the women home together. It is obvious that the collective male subject makes the decisions and initiatives. However, the comment on the reprimand to be received at home rather relates to the young women.

How can the narrative interaction in the creation of this small story be analysed? Could the terms animator, author and principal be applied in the analysis? The animator is the person who has read this story at the original meeting. Unfortunately, there are no sources available on this event. The initials F. W. indicate that a single author wrote the story. However, the narration proceeds in strictly collective perspective from the beginning to the end. In Goffman’s terms, this
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story has an individual author but a collective principal. This form of narrative interaction appears in many local event narratives in hand-written newspapers.

On the third level of analysis, the story relates to historical events, ideologies and master narratives. The story is a counter-narrative to the ideological goals of the temperance movement, since it depicts the meeting only as a boring and low-spirited preparation for the spontaneous and joyful walking tour. However, this joy and spontaneity is, apparently, gained without a drop of alcohol.

The other example, entitled “The Gymnastics Evening” was signed by the pen-name Kaiho, which was one of the two female contributors to Kehitys. This is a simple story on the first training of the short-lived women’s gymnastics club organised by the society. However, close reading reveals a complex and symmetrical narrative structure: Active I-narrator – Merging we-narrator – Active I-narrator. The first-person singular narrator frames the story, which changes into the first person plural when the gymnastics training starts. At first, the ‘we’ refers to the narrator and her best friend, who arrive excited at the first training of women’s gymnastics. The narrator depicts the enjoyment and good mood of the training, continuing in first person plural, which now includes the whole group of women. The young women are laughing at themselves and their clumsiness: “It was fun, so incredibly fun to be able to do the gymnastics” (Kehitys, 16 March 1893). In the middle there is a sequence in which the narrator goes back into her memories, which are depicted as collective memories with “zero person” (Hakulinen et al 2004, 1284):

One felt that one was still a schoolchild, the present time vanished for a moment, moments from dear childhood came into one’s mind, when just like now our teacher taught us the first movements in the spacious school hall. How much less one knew of the world then; how many castles in the air, which one had built thereafter on the future, had the wind taken far away, only leaving disappointed hopes. Thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands (Kehitys, 16 March 1893).

After training, the young women come outside and see “a black group” of young men. The narrator is still in her school memories and thinks they are a bunch of schoolboys about to throw snowballs at the girls. However, this group turns out to be the young men of the society who have come to see that the girls get home safely (Salmi-Niklander 2006, 210–211).

Kaiho’s story resembles the previous example, since it has an individual author but a collective principal. This tension is related with the ideological context of the story. Memories of school gymnastics are depicted as collective memories
that create a temporary communitas, an intensive feeling of unity, in the group of young women. Actually, these memories divided the group of young women: only those who had attended girls’ or co-ed secondary school would have memories of spacious halls for gymnastics. Those who had attended primary school would probably have done some simple movements in classrooms or in the schoolyard. Women’s gymnastics was one form of the new activities which expressed the changing position of women in late-19th-century Finnish society (Laine 1984, 247–254). The university opened up to female students during the 1880s and the 1890s, and new professions became available for women. The vision of the young men waiting outside the gymnastics hall suggests that these processes caused suspicion and caution among the men.

**Rural stories: picnics and fairs**

The young people in the agrarian youth society in Hiirola had received more limited schooling than members of the temperance society Kehitys. The literary competence of the writers varied: some could produce crafted, though conventional, stories or essays using nationalistic discourse with its allegorical observations of nature (Salmi-Niklander 2013a, 84).

On the other hand, there are many local event narratives in Virittäjä that are comparable to the one I discussed in the previous section. One of them was short and simple story, entitled “A summer retreat”, published in September 1907 (Salmi-Niklander 2013b). It has no authorial name and the issue was edited by a group of two women and three men. In Goffman’s terms, the story has both a collective author and a collective principal. The narration proceeds in the first person plural from the beginning to the end, depicting the very simple events of the summer retreat: a group of young people gather on a beautiful morning in July and walk about 5 kilometres to visit a crofter’s cottage. They manage to cook tea on a stove, and have their meeting in a barn because of a sudden rain. This meeting includes reading out the hand-written newspaper. When the rain stops they have a running contest. A man appears with some musical machine (an accordion or a barrel organ) and suggests that they could dance, but instead they decide to start heading back home.

Nothing happens in this story in the Labovian sense, but a closer analysis of narrative positions reveals some interesting complexities. The group of young people remains a unified group from beginning to end, whether cooking tea or chopping firewood. As a contrast, the two other actors in the story, the lady from the crofter’s cottage and the man with the music machine, are gendered individuals. This simple story can be interpreted as a counter-narrative to
the gender-segregated practices typical to Finnish agrarian life in which both men and women had different tasks. The popular movement provided possibilities to question these traditional segregations.

A story with a more individual perspective was published in the third issue of *Virittäjä* (March 1906), edited by five young men (Salmi-Niklander 2013, 84–85). However, the individual perspective is a complex issue. This story was signed with the gender-neutral pseudonym Punkaharju (referring to a scenic place in eastern Finland) and depicts the I-narrator's trip to a fair at Mikkeli. The story is narrated in the first person, but only at the very end does it become apparent that the narrator is a man. The end is anti-climactic: the narrator looks forward to the amusements of the fair, he is impressed by the merry-go-round and pretty girls, but does not dare to fulfil his dreams:

> As evening was approaching the pretzels were selling well; the boys bought girls pretzels as large as roots in the swamp, and the girls had their hands full when they left the stalls. I didn't have the courage to say to anyone: will you have a pretzel if I buy you one? I thought that tomorrow I'd be a brave fellow like the others, but when tomorrow came I walked about, nothing came out of it, the day passed in vain like yesterday and that's all (*Virittäjä*, March 1906).

This story, like many others in *Virittäjä*, was obviously written by a person with little experience of writing. What is the position of the narrative: an active I-narrator depicting his own experiences or an unreliable narrator (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 101)? Is the awkwardness of the story a conscious parodic element, or an indicator of the author's limited literary skills?

Interpreted with Goffman's terminology, this text provides a complex case: the pseudonym indicates an individual author, but the paper was edited by a collective team of five young men. And is the narrator the principal of the story? In this case I would call the I-narrator a “fictional principal” – or, applying Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's term (1983), “an unreliable principal”. Although the story is presented as a personal experience narrative, the naivety of the narrator rather makes him a fictional character.

I have found some background information for the young men in the editorial team: three of them were founding members of the society, but two of them, Ferdinand and Juhani Wesalainen, had joined the society in 1906, vanishing from the membership records after two years. It is quite probable that they have been young farm workers who were actively recruited into the society. The founding members, sons and daughters of land-owning families, patronised the new members, which was expressed in *Virittäjä*. The first issues included a
few apparently parodic texts, fictional letters from simple country men to their
sweethearts, where the parody is created through a contrast of ornate metaphoric
language and the simple events of country life. I have interpreted the story of the
fair as a counter-narrative, both to these parodic texts and to stories in which
simple events such as skiing trips are interpreted through nationalistic ideology
(Salmi-Niklander 2009, 17–19).

**Individual and collective perspectives**

Local event narratives can be interpreted as “thick descriptions” in the terms
developed by Clifford Geertz (1973): they provide the means for the ‘diagnosis’ of
communicative and interactive events. Narrators of local event narratives have
double roles as actors and observers. *Virittäjä* and *Kehitys* both provide excellent
examples of dialogic and collective writing that express hidden tensions in the
community. In *Kehitys*, individual writers created different authorial identities
and styles with pen names and narrative positions. In *Virittäjä*, the editing pro-
cess was collective and no individual writers stood out from the crowd. Individual
voices can be observed in *Virittäjä*, too, although they are fictionalised with
pseudonyms and narrative strategies: stories of fairs and skiing trips are probably
based on personal experiences, although these experiences are distanced using
metaphor, irony and parody.

The stories I have analysed discuss embodied experiences: heat and cold,
sounds and visions, eating and drinking, physical movement. These experiences
were depicted very soon after the events, which gives them a tone of immediacy.
Although the events in these stories are simple and apparently trivial, strong
emotions of joy, hope and disappointment are embedded in them. Emotions
and embodied experiences can be studied in letters and diaries, but thecollective
writing process of hand-written newspapers gives them special value: these
stories are created in interaction, and these emotions and experiences are shared
in a community. However, some experiences divide communities: stories of girls’
gymnastics training and a young man’s visit to a fair provide good examples of
this.

How does the narrative methodology of small stories promote the analysis of
local event narratives in archival materials? Analysing the roles of the author, the
principal and the animator in historical materials is challenging, but these terms
can be helpful in the process of analysing individual and collective emotions and
experiences. They provide tools for the comparison of stories from different time
periods and communities.
The comparison with the shipboard diaries studied by Andrew Hassam and soldiers’ writing studied by Martyn Lyons shows some similarities and differences. The self-referential writing that Hassam observes in shipboard diaries comes out now and then in hand-written newspapers. However, very seldom do the writers of hand-written newspapers refer to their individual writing processes: the self-referential expressions are rather metanarrative comments on the ‘tellability’ of the story: Is this story worth telling? How is it possible to find a suitable topic for a story? Lyons comments that soldiers’ diaries and letters often “do not distinguish the trivial from the significant” (2013, 60). But is the difference between the trivial and the significant a researcher’s evaluation? I have observed that writers of hand-written newspapers depict apparently trivial events during periods of dramatic historical change. But are these events trivial after all?

Even though the experiences depicted in my case studies are not related to traumatic experiences or great turning points in life histories, they have been written during periods of change in these communities of young people: the temperance society Tähti and the agrarian youth society in Hiïrola. In both communities, the initiative for the hand-written newspaper in community coincided with the arrival of new social and political tensions. In Helsinki, these tensions were generated by the relationships of students, artisans and working-class members; in Hiïrola, they were formed by the relationships of farm-owning and landless families, fuelled by the political struggles in early 20th-century Finland. The changing position of women was one of the big issues in both communities. These processes were acted out in small everyday events and negotiations, and hand-written newspapers provided a medium for processing these tensions.

Archival sources


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Local event narratives in hand-written newspapers


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Kirsti Salmi-Niklander


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