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UNDERSTANDING AND MOTIVATION FOR READING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FINLAND

The importance of reading in the rural community. Self-determination theory. Motivation for reading. Understanding strategies.

KEY WORDS: reading, motivation, Finland, 18th century

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING IN THE RURAL COMMUNITY

“Children should not only learn hard, but learn in the right way [...], otherwise they do not understand anything they have read,” wrote Johannes Gezelius the Elder, Bishop of Turku, in his Church Order of 1673, *Perbreves commonitiones*. In this booklet, he gave several instructions concerning learning, teaching and conducting examinations in the Catechism. It was important not only to read and learn things by heart, but also to understand the read texts. Similarly, the Swedish Church Law of 1686 required understanding of the read text. When children learned to read, it was the task of adults to make sure that they were also able to understand what they read. According to Gezelius (1666; 1673, IV:5, IV:11; Kircko-Laki, 1986, II:10; Laasonen, 1977, pp. 263, 370), their eternal blessedness depended on their understanding of Christianity.

In early modern Finland, reading was closely connected to the Lutheran confession and knowing Christianity. It was parents' task to take care of their children's learning, and a priestly task to examine both adults and children in Christianity. If parents had problems with teaching – many of them still had poor reading skills themselves in the first half of the eighteenth century – they could receive help from their parishes, where parish clerks or even cleverer boys worked as teachers (Gezelius, 1673, IV:1, IV:8; Laine, Laine, 2010, p. 265).

It was not only worry for the state of one's soul which motivated people to read, but also the requirement of being able to read the Catechism when they wanted to acquire certain civil rights. Without reading skills, a person could not get married, receive the Eucharist or become a godparent. Although it was often enough to know the Catechism, reading from the actual book was still recommended. According to Gezelius, those who read from the book understood the read text better than those who had learnt it by heart. Also, the Church Law of 1686 obliged people to read from the book (Kircko-Laki, 1986, II:10; Laasonen, 1977, pp. 263, 270–271; Laine, Laine, 2010, pp. 270–271).

There was an additional advantage of being able to read from the book: people who could read could peruse not only the Catechism, but also other texts. The Church, which, on the one hand, required reading skills also from common people, on the other hand, was worried about those common readers, who sometimes got excited with heretical texts or secular publications. The latter, however – fortunately for the Church – were still rather sparse in the eighteenth century. The ability to read the Catechism required of all those who wanted to enjoy certain civil rights can be interpreted as a form of external motivation, because rewards in the form of being allowed to marry or receive the Eucharist followed. On the other hand, being able to read texts chosen by the reader themselves served as an internal motivation for learning how to read, which resulted from their inner hopes and needs (Deci, Ryan, 2012; Laine, 2017, pp. 167, 178).

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

According to the self-determination theory by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, all human beings have three basic psychological needs. If these needs are satisfied, a person is motivated. These needs are competence, autonomy and relationship. Autonomy means that individuals are self-regulated; they can make decisions concerning their life and work. People also need to feel competent, which means that they have confidence in their own abilities and believe that they can accomplish the tasks they have undertaken. Thirdly, people need to develop relationships with others. Satisfying all these needs makes people healthy and thrive and increases their motivation, whereas when one of these needs is not satisfied, psychological problems occur (Deci, Ryan, 2012).

In this article, I discuss common people's motivation for reading in the eighteenth century while referring to the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan. Usually, motivation for reading as it is in the modern world is researched. There is, however, no reason for which the theory should not be applied to older material. The psychological needs of human beings have not changed very much for

centuries. Three centuries ago, people lacked competence, but they had similar emotions to modern people. To avoid anachronism, I have interpreted their emotions and behaviour in the context of the eighteenth century, taking into account the possibilities and restrictions of their world. This is a new way to research reading motivation in history and a kind of experiment in applying a modern method to old material.

MOTIVATION FOR READING

How were these needs fulfilled in the lives of common people in eighteenth-century Finland? According to the theory, readers who can choose their reading material are motivated because they enjoy autonomy in choosing the text. The possibility to choose is preceded by two conditions. First of all, one must be literate; without reading skills, choosing the reading does not make sense, unless there is someone else to do the reading for them.

Secondly, one must have texts to choose from, and until the middle of the nineteenth century, the number of books in Finland was quite small. Later on, both the level of literacy and the production of Finnish-language publications increased. The available books were mostly basic religious literature (Pipping, 1856–1857), which was not a problem in a rather religious society, but it did limit the choice of books for the common people.

Literacy among common people was generally higher in eighteenth-century Finland than in the previous century. There were, however, differences in literacy between geographical areas. People in western Finland were much more literate than people in the east. The availability of books was also better in the western parts of the country than in the eastern ones. There were bigger cities and fewer war disasters in the west. All printing houses were located in western Finland, while the printing house in Viipuri disappeared during the Russian invasion at the beginning of the eighteenth century. So, common people in the West were better motivated to read, as well as to buy books (Gardberg, 1949–1957; Laine, Laine, 2010).

The second need listed in the self-determination theory is competence. Did people feel competent in reading in early modern Finland? There is no simple answer to this question. Quite a few people had problems with reading. They had poor reading skills and they felt very unsure in reading and were anxious before examinations and other situations in which they had to perform reading; some of them even ran away from the church when the examination began (Laine, Laine, 2010, pp. 263–264).

Why was reading so difficult for some people? Why did they not feel competent? At this point, we approach the question of understanding. There are two main aspects of it: first, the more extensive vocabulary one has, the better they can understand what they read; secondly, the more common the read text is, the better one is able to understand it (Willingham, Uddén, 2018, pp. 100, 113). In early modern Finland, people were supposed to go to church regularly. At church, they heard sermons and the liturgy, religious texts and speeches (Kircko-Laki, 1986, II). Although the eighteenth century was still a quite religious period, there were differences in interest in religion between people. As often happens, some of them were more interested in religion, and some were less so; some had more family members, friends and relatives talking about religious things, while some had not. Those who were more familiar with the religious speech had richer religious vocabulary and were already familiar with the texts read at church, so they found it easier to learn how to read the same or quite similar texts (Gezelius, 1673, II:6; E.M. Laine, 2002, pp. 68–69). Those who were not so familiar with religious speech found it harder to learn reading. They found new words difficult, as they had not had much experience with such texts before. Reading was difficult when they did not understand what they read.

We also know that reading, especially so-called extra reading, was not very popular among common people. Reading might have been seen as a waste of time and, worst of all, considered as tempting children to aspire things enjoyed by a higher social class instead of concentrating on “real” (i.e. rural) work. Who could then take care of the farm? Therefore, studying was usually more recommended for younger sons than for the eldest, who was supposed to go on with farming. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the upper classes also considered the education of common people’s children unnecessary. (*Christendomens tilstånd...*; Laine, 2015; Mäkinen, 2016, p. 28).

There is a clear connection between motivation and self-confidence in one’s reading. Research has indicated the significance of the attitudes held by parents, teachers and peers for one’s feeling self-confident and competent. In families which did not value literary skills, there were no highly-literate members nor books, and they might have perceived themselves as non-literary families. It was more difficult for anyone who came from such a family to become a good reader. Some evidence for it has been preserved, especially from eastern Finland (Laasonen 1967, 307–308; Barratt-Pugh, 2000, p. 8; E.M. Laine 2002, pp. 63–64, 68, 75–76; Bråten, 2007, pp. 73–74; Willingham, Uddén, 2018, pp. 177, 179).

Particularly, one’s own inner motivation could be lost in this situation. The attitudes towards reading are usually based on emotions; therefore, it is difficult to change them using rational arguments. If one acquires a poor attitude towards

reading in their childhood, it will probably prevail throughout their adult life (Bråten, 2007, p. 74; Willingham, Uddén, 2018, p. 172).

It was not only the negative attitude of parents or peers to reading that decreased the reading motivation. The ability to read affects the brain of a reader, which becomes different from the brain of an illiterate person. A literate person has, for example, better working memory than an illiterate one. Better functioning working memory produces more motivation to read, because it makes reading easier (Dehaene, 2010, p. 241).

The sections above bring us to the third psychological need which influences motivation: the need for a relationship. Because the attitudes of parents and peers do influence one's activity, readers must take them into account when they start considering learning how to read. If they expect mockery, they have to decide whether they prefer to suffer mockery and read, give up reading or read in secret. If their inner motivation to read is strong enough, they will probably read despite all the threats (Willingham, Uddén, 2018, pp. 174–175).

In the eighteenth century, it was normal to read together on different occasions. In a devoted family, the head of the family, usually the father, read prayers and sermons or other devotional literature to the whole family. This was called home devotion (Gezelius 1673, III:2; Kircko-Laki, 1986, IV:11; Laasonen 1991, p. 85). Upper class family members in particular would gather together to read. There was one reader and the others listened. At such gatherings, fiction and newspapers were usually read. This kind of reading was also practised at some religious gatherings of common people. Not everyone was literate, but listening was not a problem. Sometimes, even the listeners were enthroned as readers (Laine 1996, pp. 232–233). The real reader was probably motivated by the special task they had taken on: to read.

However, maintaining the relationship on occasions when reading had to be performed might have caused social pressure. The examinations in the Catechism were held publicly, in front of all the people from the same parish or village. Sometimes, the examiner (a priest) was frightening or abrupt (Laine, Laine, 2010, pp. 263–264). For poor readers or generally timid people, this was a terrifying event and had a bad influence on their motivation to read.

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIES

Ivar Bråten has divided the understanding strategies into four groups: remembering, organising, processing and observation strategies. With the remembering strategy, a person reads the same text several times, and through this rep-

edition, tries to understand it better. In the eighteenth century, repetitive reading was a common form of reading both religious and secular literature. The amount of literature was limited and there was not always new texts to read (Mäkinen, 1997, pp. 67–68). Repetitive reading supports both reading by heart and reading from the book. In fact, it is a good strategy in a religious reading practice, where meditation, praying and deeper reflecting take place.

Repetitive reading was probably effective in religious reading in the eighteenth century; however, according to Bråten, more crucial to understanding are the other three strategies, which are called deep strategies. In organising strategies, a person organises and categorises the information; in processing strategies, they make the information more valid and understandable with the help of other information; and in observation strategies, they estimate their knowledge and understanding during the reading process (Bråten, 2007, p. 68).

When we think about learning the Catechism or reading religious texts, the observation strategy was surely used in the eighteenth century. At the very least, good readers probably estimated their understanding of the read text while reading. This was also important during the examinations in the Catechism, when a priest asked for definitions and specifications of the read texts in order to test the examinee's understanding. According to the Church Law, the examinee was supposed to explain the Catechism in their own words, as well. The other two strategies, organising and processing, provide better support in reading books with more facts. They also demand writing skills and paper to make notes, which was not so common in rural families in eighteenth-century Finland (Kircko-Laki, 1986, II:10; Makkonen, 2002, p. 12).

As already stated, in comparison to learning by heart, reading from the book increases understanding. Good readers, who usually read from the book, understand the text they read much better. Fluency in reading helps to understand the text as well, because the reader does not have to think about every word separately, which is hard. The more they read, the more fluent their reading becomes and they understand the text they read better and better, which, in turn, increases their motivation for reading. On the contrary, those who do not understand the texts they read are hardly motivated to read. This carries out the so-called Matthew Effect: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." (Matt. 25:29)

Even the common structure helps with understanding. The person who is familiar with the Catechism or a sermon has no problem with reading them. Instead, they may have problems with reading, for example, regulations. Getting familiar with a text of some kind needs practice and takes time. The more practice one gets, the more familiar the text becomes and the better they can understand it (Strømsø,

2017, p. 36). Even the context of text is important for understanding. Sentences have different meanings in different contexts (Armstrong, 2013, pp. 54–55).

According to neurological research, also sounds and music support understanding. The sound works as a channel for transmitting information. Whenever one reads and listens to music at the same time, they learn better. Music helps to make a difference between the length of syllables and speech sounds, which is important in learning how to read. Reading aloud and from the book at the same time gives the brain more freedom to use the capacity for understanding (Willingham, Uddén, 2018, pp. 88, 91; Huotilainen, 2019, pp. 137–138).

Since the Middle Ages, singing had been used to teach reading, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was typical for pupils to learn how to read at one time while reading aloud (Laasonen 1977, 213–214; Hyyrö, 2011, p. 337). There is no doubt that it sounded chaotic and noisy, but according to modern research, it assisted in learning and understanding the read text.

What is most important is the heart of understanding. Understanding does not refer to the understanding the read text literally as it is, but to the understanding of the idea of this text, the information it conveys. We easily forget the details but remember the most important things, and this is crucial for understanding (Willingham, Uddén, 2018, pp. 133). This is probably what priests expected to hear from the Church members, when they examined their knowledge of the Catechism and asked extra questions. In this way, they could also control the way in which the examinees understood the Catechism and correct their understanding of it, if necessary.

CONCLUSION

Reading skills were part of Christian education in early modern Finland. It was the task of parents to teach their children to read, according to the Church Law of 1686. If they were unable to do it because, for example, they were illiterate themselves, they could receive help from their parish. It was important for a Christian to acquaint themselves with the basics of Christianity by reading the Catechism.

The ability to read was not sufficient. People were also supposed to understand the read text. If they did not understand it, they were not motivated to read. Among the understanding strategies, memorising was used most frequently. It was based on repetitive reading, which was a common reading strategy in early modern Finland, not least because the amount of the books in vernacular was still small. Better readers even used observation strategies. They estimated their knowledge and understanding during the reading process.

According to Deci and Ryan,, there are three fundamental psychological needs, which bring not only well-being, but also motivation to people. They are competence, autonomy and relationship. In early modern Finland, these needs were satisfied in various ways. In general, those who were more familiar with religious speech and reading, a result of their family background or because of their friends, learned quickly, made better progress and proved their competence and autonomy in reading. Others, who had less support from their family or community, had poorer religious vocabulary, more difficulties to understand what they read and less motivation to read. They were afraid of the examinations in the Catechism and of the social pressure such circumstances. They also felt inadequacy in reading.

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Summary

Reading skills were part of Christian education in early modern Finland. According to the church law (1686), it was a task of parents to teach their children to read. If they were unable to do it, for example because they were illiterate themselves, they could receive help from their parish. It was important for a Christian to acquaint him/herself with the basics of Christianity by reading the Catechism.

The ability to read was not sufficient. People were also supposed to understand the text they read. If they did not understand it, they were not motivated to read. Among the understanding strategies memorising was used most frequently. It was based on repetitive reading, which was a common reading strategy in early modern Finland – not least because the amount of books in vernacular was still small. The same texts were read again and again. The strategy is also called intensive reading. Better readers even used observation strategies. They estimated their knowledge and understanding during the reading process.

According to Deci and Ryan (Motivation, Personality and Development within Embedded Social Contexts: An Overview of Self-Determination Theory, 2012), there are three fundamental psychological needs, which bring not only well-being but also motivation to people. They are competence, autonomy and relationship. In early modern Finland these needs were satisfied in various ways. In general, those who were more familiar with religious speech and reading, as a result of their family background or because of their friends, learnt quickly, made better progress and proved their competence and autonomy in reading. Others, who had less support from their family or community, had poorer religious vocabulary, more difficulties to understand what they read and less motivation to read. They were afraid of the examinations in the Catechism and of the social pressure in such circumstances. They also felt inadequacy in reading.

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