Abstract


Key words: women, identity, narrative, termination, bank employees

The study concerns life changes and new selections made by women who lost their jobs at a bank. The research investigates the women’s own narratives of their job histories, uncertainty resulting from their job loss, and future plans. The subject is the rationalization of bill-paying operations carried out at Postipankki in 1990–93. The employer, the bank, required loyalty, diligence and flexibility during working hours from the women, but at the same time provided a number of social benefits. In the spring of 1990 the “life-long” social contract collapsed when the bank announced its intention to terminate some of its bill-paying centers. The staff was given a transitional period of 2–3.5 years to adjust to the closing of the centers. The study material is comprised of interviews of women who lost their jobs after a long and stable period of employment at the bank. Seventeen women were interviewed, some several times.

The life changes and new selections of the women who lost their jobs are analyzed by means of the concept of identity. The basis of the study is the hypothesis that job loss and reassessment of identity go hand in hand. The study defines identity in discursive and constructionistic ways and distances itself from the approach emphasizing the uniqueness, permanence of the identity and the opposition between society and the individual. Identity is examined in various linguistic practices as something constructed and maintained. The determination of discursive identity leads to the second theoretical concept in the study, life-narrative. When the women describe in the interviews their life, work, job loss or choices, they also define themselves in respect to work, family or life change. In the interview situation the researcher is the audience for this narrative, but is also a participant and interpreter in the identity narrative. One of the important aspects is the researcher’s expressed participation and reflection, which also represents the role of the researcher as the interpreter of the interviewees’ life-narrative. In addition to the concepts of identity and life-narrative, the study has sought to make use of methodological tools from discourse analysis, conversation analysis and the narrative approach.
The loss of job, separation from the bank and different manners of outlining this change have been examined on the basis of five case narratives. The tension between job loss and identity are expressed differently in each case. Distancing oneself from the bank, the job or the choices made in life occurred at different speeds and were directed towards different aspects of the identity. The threat of job loss was an experience common to them all, but the consequences and ways of reacting were individual. For one woman, losing her job could mean the reassessment of her entire life and previous choices; in other words a retelling of the fundamental quality of her identity. For another, the change initially seemed to open up completely new possibilities, until the recession shattered those plans. Due to the long transitional period the women were forced to go through the loss of their job twice. The first time they worked through it was after receiving notice of the rationalization of the bill-paying centers, the second time when they finally lost their jobs. In some respects only with the approaching job loss did they process the re-narration of their identity. There were other events in the lives of the women besides the loss of their jobs that could have had a greater meaning from the standpoint of reassessing their identity. The flexibility of identity represents the individual’s strength and ability to adapt in different situations. In particular, training or vocational skills are not sufficient to cope with the loss of one’s job, but one important resource can in fact be the individuals ability to describe herself again.

The case narratives can be thought to represent rather typical Finnish women’s stories. The strongest type of narrative explained the bond to the bank as a rising life and career, a sort of success story. At its most powerful this interpretation was expressed in the narratives of women who had moved from the countryside to town and from comprehensive school into her job at the bank. Getting a bank job without any training had been a significant turning point in life. In addition to just work and income, bank employment also reflected owning a home, becoming middle class and a certain life style. Along with the success stories the women also included interpretations of their connection to the bank involving drift and fatigue. Work at the bank often represented a safe and stable base upon which to build their lives. In regard to job loss and future plans the women’s narratives were linked to the basic orientation of Finnish women, with was shared in the interview situation. It is the horizon of modern life, where we seek to move forward and change.