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CONFERENCES

Sense and Sensibility – Ethnology of Affect

10th Ethnology Days in Pori, Finland, 15–16 March 2018

Konsta Kajander & Jelena Salmi

With the so-called “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences, affect has become a popular theoretical frame in the research of human practice and sociality. The notion of affect places feelings, emotions, embodied experiences, and the feel of things at the front and center of academic interest. Researchers differ in their definitions of affect – some see affect as a potential to affect and an openness to being affected, while others approach it as an intensity, a sensation, or a bodily process. Whether and how affect is distinct from emotion is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate.

Ethnology Days, arranged by the Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos and the Pori University Consortium, tapped into the emerging trend of affect research. With its theme *Sense and Sensibility – Ethnology of Affect*, the conference attracted approximately 80 researchers from Finland and beyond to discuss feelings in the Finnish city of Pori. The three keynotes and seven working groups spread over two days on March 15 and 16 addressed questions of touch, affective materiality, cultural emotions, and ethnographer’s emotions, among other things.

The first conference day started with a warm welcome from the organizers. After that, it was time for the first keynote by Taina Kinnunen, who presented aspects of the Finnish touching culture and the affective power of touch on human bodies. Kinnunen’s research relies on “touch biographies,” people’s written descriptions of the role of touch in their everyday lives. According to Kinnunen, effects of physical contact – or the lack thereof – accumulate and become patterned and “sticky” over time, affecting how people touch each other and how they experience and talk about physical contact. This challenges (Western) ideas of autonomous, individual subjects and speaks for the relationality and porousness of human bodies.

In her keynote, Kinnunen presented examples of her empirical research material. Not all tactile experiences and memories recounted in touch biographies were positive. In the most traumatic texts, violent touch was framed as “normal” behavior and an integral part of the narrator’s lifecycle whether in the form of domestic violence in childhood, experiences of maltreatment in youth, or partner abuse. Sometimes the object of violence was also a subject



of violence. As Kinnunen suggested, we tend to touch the way we have been touched, which can lead to the reproduction of affective inequality.

A commentator from the audience pointed out that there is still little research on touch. This may be a methodological problem: how can one access knowledge on touching if it is not articulated in interviews, memoirs, and other research materials? Kinnunen suggested that the reading of narratives requires ethnographic sensibility and sensitivity, that is, the researcher must “invest” herself in the text, and to pay attention to gaps and ruptures in the narrative.

The second keynote speaker, Maja Povrzanović Frykman, discussed affects in the context of war and migration. The speaker suggested that ethnologists should “follow the senses” to create an understanding of the affective relations between people and place. War, disrupting everyday patterns and routines of life, makes people acutely aware of the intensities of affect. Yet, in interviews ethnologists only encounter memories and narratives, which Povrzanović Frykman approached as emotions, as cognitive representations of affects. How, then, can emotions be used to examine affective states? The presenter urged researchers to pay attention to the so-called “affective circles” in interviewees’ ways of talking, in pauses and laughs, and in sensory memories unfolding through objects. She also talked about “affective flashbacks” in narratives – the sickening smell of fish, the eating of moldy bread, and the humiliation of wearing “stinking clothes” provided by the Red Cross. Povrzanović Frykman challenged ethnologists to examine the relations between affects and their representations: why and how are certain experiences remembered while others are forgotten or left unmentioned? She also posed an interesting theoretical challenge for affect researchers: turn away from linguistic analysis and social constructionism and focus on the body and embodiment.

After lunch, we headed to our first session *Tutkijan järki ja tunteet* (Researcher’s sense and sensibility), which consisted of six presentations. Based on their fieldwork experiences, Eija Schwartz, Tiina Suopajarvi, and Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto gave good methodological tips for spotting affects both in the midst of fieldwork and after it when transcribing collected research materials into text. Laughing, cursing, crying, pauses, and long silences function as clues when interpreting affects from speech or texts, especially in “expert-oriented” interviews that are usually focused on informants’ knowledge and “facts.” In order to find affects, researchers should pay attention not only to *what* informants tell us, but also to *how* they narrate their experiences and *why* they speak the way they do.

Although the reflexive turn has had a positive effect on ethnographic descriptions about fieldwork circumstances, the collection of research materials, and researcher’s relationships with informants, strong emotions may still come

as a surprise when conducting research. In her touching presentation, Pilvi Hämeenaho reflected on the difficulties she faced while interviewing parents for her ethnographic research concerning the recognition of parents' knowledge in the health care of special needs children in Finnish schools. Hämeenaho noted that the parents who had most challenges with their children – or distrust towards the school's and health officials' ways of handling difficulties – were also the most likely to participate in her research. This demonstrates how the generalizability of results is a huge challenge in sensitive topics.

Hämeenaho's presentation was nicely complemented by Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro, who emphasized the importance of paying attention to researchers' well-being. Although ethnologists should be empathetic towards their research participants, excessive emotional empathy can lead to stress and anxiety. Who is going to take care of the researcher when emotions become too hard to handle? Finally, in her closing remark, Kirsi-Maria Hytönen brought up several important ethical questions: How much empathy is too much? How to react when an informant tells a racist or a misogynist joke? What to do when interviewees expect the researcher to support their cause, politically or otherwise? These are questions we believe should be addressed already at the undergraduate level. As Hytönen stated, only a healthy researcher can conduct ethically sound research.

The second day started with Sarah Holst Kjær's keynote lecture about heterosexual relationships and cultural emotions. In her research, Kjær is particularly interested in how cultural aspects contribute to the forming of romantic relationships. According to Kjær, cultural models relating to relationships are formed in public discourses that are overloaded with harmonic/unharmonic dichotomies. People come to embody these models, representing belief systems, rituals and norms of acceptable behavior, and often stereotypical roles of women and men in their relationships. In order to find and decode cultural models of heterosexual relationships and gender, researchers must analyze couples' representations in different contexts. Kjær also reminded of the European Protestant and Catholic religious heritage, which is still visible in the cultural thinking about heterosexual relationships. Even in "liberal" Denmark, heteronormativity informs what is expected from men and women – according to Danish cultural norms, women are supposed to marry.

Before the trip back home, we still had time to visit the *Affective City* session chaired by Blanka Henriksson and Ann-Helen Sund. The session consisted of three intriguing cases of affective engagements in/with the city in the contexts of rural-urban migration, busking economy, and waste management. Lauri Turpeinen started the session by presenting his PhD project on young adults' migration from the Kainuu region to Helsinki. Focusing on the affec-

tual dimensions of arriving and settling in Helsinki, Turpeinen showed how rituals and material objects such as bicycles and wooden *kuksa* cups provided a sense of security or an “island of calm” for young migrants struggling with the hectic rhythm of city life.

Turpeinen’s insightful paper was followed by that of Marta Polec, who took us to Cracow, Poland. Polec presented an ethnography of experience economy in the context of informal street performances demonstrating the emotional exchange inherent in busking – customers pay the performers for stories, emotions, and experiences. The presentation also evoked an interesting methodological discussion on the hazy boundary between participant observation/non-participant observation.

Finally, the third paper by Blanka Henriksson and Ann-Helen Sund focused on media discourse around a “fatberg” consisting of an amalgamation of flushed down cooking fat, wipes, and nappies, discovered in the sewers of London. Presenting the practices of naming, measurement, and sensory depiction, among others, Henriksson and Sund demonstrated how news reports sought to come to terms with the uncanny object that defied the nature/culture dichotomy. Through the sensual materiality of the fatberg, both repulsive and attractive, dead and alive, humans came face to face with their unsustainable practices that had given birth to the “monster.” Nauseous yet disturbingly fascinated by this “globby basilisk” that closed the *Affective City* session, it was time for the final lunch.

All in all, Ethnology Days offered an interesting opening into ethnological affect research. Affects are an intriguing yet methodologically challenging research subject for ethnologists and anthropologists. The discussion on affect theory and methodology continues in an edited volume published by the Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos. A focus on affects enables a conceptual space to examine several questions at the heart of ethnology, including the cultural shaping of human bodies, the mind-body dichotomy, and the changing lines between genders as well as humans and non-humans. However, we were left wondering if affect research is primarily a female domain – men seemed to be underrepresented both as research subjects and objects. Therefore, we encourage all affect researchers to figure out ways of recruiting male participants. We also hope that male ethnologists, too, would dare to step into the exciting field of emotions and affects.

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