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The problem of pinning down the process of interpretation and analysis in ethnology

Jouhki, Jukka & Steel, Tytti (eds.) 2016. *Etnologinen tulkinta ja analyysi. Kohti avoimempaa tutkimusprosessia*. (Ethnological interpretations and analysis. Towards a more open research process) Helsinki: Ethnos. 2016. 431 pp. ISBN 978-952-68509-0-0. ISSN 0357-511X.

Analysis and interpretation are significant and self-evident steps within the ethnological research process. These steps are closely interwoven with other phases of the research process, which may explain why it often seems difficult to put the analyzing process into words and to describe

it in detail. In consequence, ethnologists often fail to include lengthy or explicit descriptions of this process in their texts. In contrast, as the editors of the anthology point out, ethnographic and fieldwork methods have been presented and discussed in great depth within the field of ethnology. But how do ethnologists analyze and interpret their sources? What happens during the process of analyzing and interpreting data?

The anthology *Etnologinen tulkinta ja analyysi. Kohti avoimempaa tutkimusprosessia* (Ethnological interpretations and analysis. Towards a more open research process) seeks to address these questions from different viewpoints. The book is based on papers presented at the VIII Ethnology Days under the heading *Thick Grip on Data? – Eth-*

nological Interpretations and Analysis arranged by the Association of Finnish Ethnologists, Ethnos, in Helsinki in 2014. Researchers were invited to reflect on the way they go about analyzing and interpreting their data and what concepts they use in their analysis. They were also asked to discuss how they incorporate their informants into the process of interpretation and how they make interpretations that are in line with research ethics.

The book departs from a broad definition of ethnology, also including folklore studies, anthropology, and other forms of cultural studies. The writers of the articles are ethnologists, folklorists, anthropologists, and museum professionals. The contributors are in different stages of their academic career and also in different stages of their research projects, which obviously has influenced how they have chosen to address the topic.

The anthology consists of twelve articles grouped together in three sections: 1) Renewing Ethnology, 2) Dialogicity and Ethics, and 3) Analytical Tools. The main objective of the book is to consider the process of analysis and interpretation, but there are several other connected themes and concepts that are central in many of the articles, for instance questions about ethics, reflexivity, co-operation and co-laboration, interaction or dialogue with informants, and engaging informants in the research process. In many of the chapters, the contributors also describe their source material and present their recent findings.

For the first article in the anthology, Jukka Jouhki and Tytti Steel read several recently published doctoral dissertations and 59 articles published in *Ethnologia Europaea* between 2010–2014 to find out how ethnologists describe the process of analysis and interpretation and to consider how analysis and interpretation can be defined within the ethnological field. Jouhki and Steel found that ethnologists seldom go into great detail about how they have gone about analyzing the data in their research. Jouhki and Steel point out that, explicit and detailed accounts would make the research process and the final work more transparent and therefore easier to evaluate. As it is, the reader has to rely on that the analysis has been carried out meticulously. Also the text in itself can often reveal much about

the researcher's profound knowledge about the subject, and his or her intuitiveness and ability to raise academically relevant themes. To increase transparency, Jouhki and Steel raise the question of what ethnologists *do* when the source material has been produced or gathered, and the writing process begins.

In my view, Jukka Jouhki and Tytti Steel's article serves as a starting point for the anthology. It brings up many important questions about the process of analysis and interpretation. After reading this chapter, I expected explicit and concrete discussions about how analysis is conducted in ethnological studies. Also, the title of the book raised similar expectations of the content. Therefore, I was somewhat confused when reading the following chapters in the first section, and also some of the articles in the other two sections. For instance, the article by Tom O'Dell and Robert Willim "jumps over" the stages of analysis and interpretation and proposes new ways in which to present the results of a research project to the public. No doubt, these new ways of presentation are interesting and might make us look at the whole research process in new ways, but I had some trouble piecing together how the chapter was connected to the main theme of the anthology.

Most of the chapters come closer to the main objectives of the book, even if many of them do not explicitly discuss the actual and concrete work related to analyzing and interpreting gathered data. In some chapters, the focus is predominantly on the position of the researcher in relation to the informants and the field. In her well-written and engaging article, Marjukka Piirainen discusses her double role or position as both cultural researcher and gardener in her study about gardening. Being an "insider" is not unique in ethnological research – many ethnologists study a subject that is close and familiar to them. Piirainen considers how her tacit knowledge about the subject influences the process of gathering data and the interpretations she makes. From her position as a gardener-cultural researcher she finds that she is able to establish fruitful dialogues with her informants. The shared experiences of gardening offer a good starting point for the interpre-

tations and the process of understanding. Elina Hytönen-Ng examines in an equally well-written chapter questions about how close relationships with informants may influence the research process. What analytical and ethical problems (but also possibilities) may occur? How can one critically analyze people one becomes close to during fieldwork? In this chapter, the main focus is on the interaction or dialogues with the people studied, as well as on ethical questions.

In my opinion, the last chapter of the book, written by Pirjo Uimonen, comes closest to describing how analysis can be conducted in practice. She recounts how she gathered and selected her material, and how the seemingly chaotic texts started to take shape through her analysis of the content, carried out by classifying and finding relevant themes and perspectives. She describes how she started from questions she found easiest and most apparent in the material, and then went on with her analysis to topics that initially felt more complicated and not so obvious. She describes how she read her material several times and in different ways, both crosswise and lengthways. This made her observe themes she initially had not noticed in the texts.

Most of the chapters are very readable and bring up relevant and interesting perspectives on

different phases in the ethnological research process. The book can therefore well be used in method courses and by students and post-graduates as an introduction to the ethnological research process. Since the articles depart from very diverse perspectives, it would, however, probably be advisable to select a number of articles that are most suitable for the educational purpose in question.

The anthology does not provide a conclusive or complete description of the analyzing process, but the different viewpoints offer a versatile picture of it. My initial confusion over the contents of the book shows how analysis and interpretation are not easy to isolate from other phases of the research process and that it is often difficult to pin down these stages. One difficulty is that not all steps in the research process take place by the desk or the computer. Ideas pop up, thoughts take form, and connections are made when we take a walk, stand in the shower, or watch a film. Later it may be problematic to remember and reconstruct how it was all done. Still, the anthology reminds and urges us to try to *observe* ourselves, to critically assess how we produce knowledge and understanding, and then write about what we have done.

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